



JUNE 2021

Town & Gown

TOWNANDGOWN.COM

COOL NOSTALGIA

NOTHING SAYS SUMMER BETTER
THAN THE ICE CREAM TRUCK

Inside: Breeding champion Percherons in Spring Mills
• **Richard Sleight, the Harmonica Man**



A Mission of Mutual Understanding

State Department veteran Bob Persiko leads the all-volunteer Global Connections in working to build bridges across cultures



"We live in a diverse community that's, in a sense, a little bit of an island in the middle of rural Pennsylvania," Bob Persiko tells Mimi Barash Coppersmith. "We have opportunities to engage with people in ways that you might not in other communities."

Robert Persiko spent the better part of his career helping foster connections with people from around the world, and in retirement, he's continuing to bring cultures together.

Persiko was elected in late 2020 as president of Global Connections, an all-volunteer organization in Centre County that aims to cultivate understanding and respect across cultures.

Persiko retired in 2007 after a 35-year career as a civil servant at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C. For most of that time, he managed a large-scale international youth exchange initiative.

Raised in Brooklyn, New York, and then New Jersey, Persiko earned a bachelor's degree at Georgetown (majoring in Spanish with minors in Portuguese and political science) and a master's in international affairs at Columbia. He

moved to Pennsylvania from Germany in 2017 so that his two sons could attend high school here, and started volunteering with Global Connections in early 2018.

Town&Gown founder Mimi Barash Coppersmith recently sat down via Zoom with Persiko to discuss the work of Global Connections in building understanding, respect, and a greater sense of community as it celebrates its 60th anniversary.

Mimi: I want to welcome you for a discussion of Global Connections. I was connected to them, and I believe that I interviewed somebody that was the head of it way back when and at that time, it was closely tied to the university. What happened?

Bob: Well, we still are tied to the university, so there's a good connection there. They're supportive of us; we're supportive of them. We kind of complement each other. There was an office in the Boucke Building on campus, so when I joined in late 2017, that was where I went to interview and find out what was happening with that organization.

The decision was made that we would give up our staff and try to save ourselves the costs that were really draining the resources of the organization, and focus completely on being a volunteer group. And that's still in the experiment phase, Mimi; we're working on that. We've got about 60 members now. Each of them a dues-paying member; some of them are active, some are not.

Mimi: How much are the dues?

Bob: \$10 a year.

Mimi: You can't get much operational money that way.

Bob: That's right. What we really needed, of course, are revenue-generating activities that we used to have for in-person activities. And we've lost that [in the pandemic], so we've been in that typical nonprofit mode of kind of biding our time and holding onto our expenses. But we've done a lot virtually, and we're holding our own. Penn State's Global Programs is still operating several programs that we used to run under the guise of Global Connections. One is the Conversation Partners program.

Mimi: I was going to ask about that, because I was part of that once.

Bob: Great. That was one of the first things I did, too, is get matched up with somebody and start having one-on-ones. I believe in the one-on-one program; I think that's the most effective thing that we do as an organization is have one-on-ones.

Mimi: I think it turns into a mentoring, as well as a personal piece of experience that you're grateful to have.

Bob: Yeah, because it actually fosters the kind of friendship and long-term involvement with people, more than a picnic or a social event where people come together once. I really believe in those one-on-one programs. We want to keep those going, and they are going, actually.

Mimi: What are you doing to survive?

Bob: Fortunately, our predecessors left us a nice inheritance of money that we are still drawing down on, but we're not drawing down on it as much as we used to, because we don't need to pay salaries for people. We don't have the fixed costs of an office. And we don't have all the things that go with that. So it's only really been in the activities where we've lost revenue, but we're also not paying much beyond holding costs.

A typical activity in the past was a



While Foxdale residents hail from different parts of the country, so many of them share common ground: a desire to learn and grow. Whether it's through volunteering or the many resident-led interest groups on campus, Foxdale residents are passionate about the causes they believe in. To learn more and plan a visit, call us at (814) 272-2146.

A Quaker-Directed Continuing Care Retirement Community



**Foxdale
Village**

500 East Marylyn Avenue | State College, PA 16801 | foxdalevillage.org 

cultural luncheon. Over the number of times that we've done that in the past three years, the average participation for that was about 70-75 people, each of them paying \$15. Then we took out the expenses of preparing the food, and that was really revenue for us. So we haven't had those. But we look forward to doing those again; if we could do three or four of those a year, that would be nice.

Other activities were some hosted luncheons or dinners that people put on in their homes; people paid money to do that. And part of the money went to the revenue of the organization. We do have some endowments that enabled us to keep going financially.

Mimi: Who are the principal donors to Global Connections?

Bob: The principal donor was originally the Ouwehand Family Fund. However, these funds were reassigned by the Ouwehands when we became an all-volunteer organization. We have also benefited from annual distributions from the Centre Foundation. The foundation maintains the Global Connections Fund, which currently has a value of \$41,900. We draw about 3.75 percent of this amount every year to partially fund operations.

Mimi: What is your annual budget?

Bob: We are budgeting about \$9,700 in expenses for the current fiscal year. This figure includes a projected deficit of just over \$5,000, which will be covered by donated funds along with money for our reserves. As I mentioned, we look forward to having revenue-generating activities when we can return to in-person programs.

Mimi: I would argue that you are supporting an important connection between foreign people in the community and the rest of us. What exactly are you doing to help overcome a growing defiance about immigrants, etc.?

Bob: I think in general, what we try to do is engage people in a way that makes

them feel welcome here and that tries to provide services to them, where they feel there's a need. For instance, I teach an English class as a volunteer under Global Connections. I have a group of people who are mostly spouses of international students or workers at Penn State. These are women, generally, women who in their own right are professionals in their own countries, but can't work here. Some of them have children, so they're taking care of them. They lacked the social engagement that they otherwise would have in pre-pandemic times and, hopefully, that they'll have again in post-pandemic times. So by bringing them together, virtually, we're actually creating a little community of people who meet on a regular basis with each other and get to know each other that way.

My discussion group on Tuesdays is an American and an international group of people. As we meet on a regular basis, we feel like we're a community in that way, too. So I think [we're] building community in the sense of getting people engaged in something and showing them that there's interest in them, and respect for what they do.

Another activity we've developed virtually is a monthly talk where an individual gives a presentation on his or her culture. And the audience for that are Americans who are learning about those countries. We've done eight, nine, so far with various countries, including Nepal, Saudi Arabia, El Salvador, Iran, Gabon in Africa. So that's teaching Americans about the cultures of the people who represent them here in our community. And it gives them an opportunity to feel that people care about who they are and where they come from.

On the other side, we have a program that we call Keystone Culture, which is a monthly program offering information about what's going on in our community. We've had one person who's a hiker in the area talking about where you can go to go hiking and enjoy the outdoors. That's for

the benefit of the international people who are here who may not know those things. We had a recent one on gardening and farmers markets. In the month of May, we [planned to] have a speaker talk about the Pennsylvania Dutch culture. What you can see from this, Mimi, is that we've got mutual education going on both sides. And I think that fosters a sense of, "You belong here. You have a place here." That's what we really want to say.

Mimi: What in the world motivates you to take on this responsibility? I assume at no pay.

Bob: That's true. I get a lot of rewards from the activities that I do. I'm an engaged volunteer and as you probably know from looking at my background, I came from a career at the U.S. Department of State, where I was principally engaged for 35 years in education and cultural exchange programs. So I've long been a believer in what the State Department

called public diplomacy, and what I think is engagement of citizens in working together with people from other countries. That's given me satisfaction over a lifetime.

And I feel like Global Connections is the place that I can do that in our community, to continue that fostering, that mission of mutual understanding and respect for people. I think that's what Global Connections is about.

Mimi: Tell us more about your membership.

Bob: The membership grows every week, as people hear about it. We're up to 60. We've got some associate members too, some affiliations, such as Ten Thousand Villages. We welcome them as an associate member. One of their directors is our vice president. So we have engagement with other like-minded organizations in the area. We're always looking for increased members, and we're always happy to welcome them.

The Learning Never Stops



Enrolling Now!
2021-2022 School Year

Call (724)643-1180
or visit **PAcyber.org**
to learn more about
personalizing your child's
learning experience.


PAcyber
 The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School



**The Bellefonte Art Museum
for Centre County**
And
The Makery of State College

the makery

**Are pleased to present our
Annual Summer Camp
for all Ages:**



Imagination Celebration 2021
ur Beautiful Earth

BAM is teaming up with **The Makery** this June, July, & August for our themed summer program "All in on Climate". As with previous summers, the theme will be explored by exhibitions and interactive programs throughout our several galleries as well as offer some experiences online.

Everyone is invited and all activities are FREE!

Join us as we use arts and crafts to help conceptualize the problem, identify the solutions and grasp our role of personal responsibilities.

Visit: www.bellefontemuseum.org for more information

"The Earth is something we all have in common" ~ Wendell Berry
Writer, poet, farmer, academic, and activist for rural life.

P.O. Box 125 • 133 N. Allegheny St. • Bellefonte, PA 16823
 Museum Hours: Fri., Sat. & Sun. 12:00 - 4:30 p.m.

bellefontemuseum.org



Mimi: You had an unusual reason for returning to the area. I've never heard it before. Will you tell our readers?

Bob: Well, when I retired from the State Department in 2007, my wife and I decided we would move to Germany with our two boys, who at the time were age 6 and 4. My wife was born and raised in Germany, and the boys and she both have dual citizenship. All of our close family members are over there. My parents are dead. I have a brother in Colorado, but we have more of a village there. And that was good for our kids. We were going to go for two years, but we decided to stay longer. It ended up being 10 years.

Nine years into our stay over there, my older son, who was then 16, said, "I'd like to go home." We said, "Oh, we are home, this is our home." And he said, "No, we were coming here and then we were gonna go home. I would like to have a high school experience in the U.S."

So we arranged for him to come and stay with very good friends of ours who live in Bellefonte. And he attended a year of high school here. At the end of that year, he said, "I want to stay." So at that point, while we all were not ready to come back from Germany, I said, "OK, I'll move over. We'll set up a household and then I'll pave the way for the rest of the family to come." Pennsylvania is not a place I'd ever lived before, but it became my adopted home in 2017 and I'm happy that I'm here.

Mimi: What do you think is the greatest impact of Global Connections?

Bob: Our greatest impact, I think, is the concept that there is a caring community here in State College, in the Centre County area, where people will feel that if they're isolated, there's a place to come to find community. And I wish that more people would hear about us and engage in this, because I think anybody can enjoy this kind of interaction. People who have these conversation partners always say

that it's a wonderful thing for them, and they think it's good for the person that they're working with.

So we would like to see more people simply available to participate in interaction activities. And as the pandemic lifts, hopefully we'll go back to actually meeting with people socially, and we can do other things that we did. We used to do a poetry evening, where people would bring poems from their countries and read them; we did that at Webster's Cafe. We have plans maybe to do that at Three Dots. We'd like to go back to doing those kinds of activities.

We'd like to be able to have outings with people. If you look on our website, there's a picture of a group of people gathered at Tussey Mountain. They were playing mini golf together. For many of our international participants, they've never played mini golf before. So this was kind of a fun outing. Just simple things like that, just the things that you and I would do on a daily basis for ourselves. Invite somebody to come along with you. Take a person on a hike with you. Invite them to your house for dinner. That's what we do. That's the spirit of community that we're trying to foster.

Mimi: How about telling readers how to get in touch with you.

Bob: For general information about Global Connections, it's gc-cc.org. We also have a Facebook page that anyone can see that allows people to find us and see what we're doing. People can register to become a member by paying \$10 to do so, and we'd be happy to welcome them, at globalconnections.wildapricot.org.

Mimi: Does the local challenge of inclusion impact your organization very much?

Bob: I think we're trying to figure out a way in which we can effectively do more in that way. I'm concerned about the Asians and the Asian Americans in our community. I've been reaching out to the

Asian community here to see if there's something that we can develop together to make people not only more aware of conditions that people feel they're in, but also to create, again, a better sense of community with people from Asian background. We have a member who's interested in working with us on that.

I think a concern now, too, is that we've evolved in seeing more hate crimes in the U.S., we've evolved and seen more xenophobia. Those are negative directions that didn't exist as clearly before the pandemic. Clearly, they were there, but they weren't as outspoken and expressive in public as we've seen them. So, the defacing of the Martin Luther King memorial the other day is a reminder that we're kind of in the middle of the maelstrom here.

Mimi: It breaks your heart.

Bob: It really does. And this is not the kind of community we want to be, is it?

Mimi: No. And whatever happened in a way is difficult to erase, because you feel whatever progress you've made, you've now been thrown back.

Bob: So many of the Asians, so many of the Chinese and the Koreans that I come in contact with through my work are more fearful these days. And that's a reminder to us that again, we need to do more to ameliorate that fear. We have to be more proactive, I think, in making people feel less afraid.

So how do we welcome people? We're going to have a sign at the airport. We got a grant from the Awesome Foundation for construction of a sign that's going to be in the terminal, "Welcome" in 25 languages. Hopefully that's the first thing you see when you come to State College by air is there's a welcome sign saying you have a place here.

Mimi: It's a wonderful idea. Who gets the credit for it?

Bob: One of our members was inspired to submit a proposal to the Awesome Foundation and was granted that. The Airport Authority has been very

cooperative in that they've given us the space that we can use. We're just paying for the design of the sign. So that's a good positive development. Banners in the town have been done. We could do more of those. I think those that were put up a while ago that spotlighted different people from different cultures was a good idea. Again, if you see physical representations of welcome, I think that's a healthy thing.

Mimi: What you do is something that we all need to do better, and on a continuum.

Bob: I think we all believe that we live among good people of goodwill, and that that expression of goodwill can be made more concrete by some activities, and we can engage people in those. I think it's an important time in our lives to have people become more proactive.

Mimi: What would be your closing message to a very loyal and interested readership of *Town&Gown*?

Bob: My closing message would be that we live in a diverse community that's, in a sense, a little bit of an island in the middle of rural Pennsylvania. We have opportunities to engage with people in ways that you might not in other communities, and that this opportunity is here for us to seize, and to become an example for other communities of inclusion. And for building community with people who are from different backgrounds, that diversity matters. And that we can do something to foster respect and mutual understanding among people of different backgrounds.

Mimi: I can say amen to that. A wonderful note on which to send our best wishes to a wonderful group, and to encourage our readers to get involved if they have any possible motivation to do it.

Bob: Thank you so much, Mimi. I appreciate your taking the time to interview me and to give some recognition to this good group. **T&G**