

2018 Dyer Award winner is paying it forward

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

John Rieger pulled a red radish the size of a golf ball from a soil-filled bin during an impromptu tour of his business, Country Power Products in Greenwich.

Before joining his wife, Millie, at home that evening, he planned to select a few more vegetables from his personal testing ground for new seed varieties.

"That's our supper," he said of his daily samples. "I'm my own guinea pig."

Nearly 60 years after he graduated from Schuylerville High School in 1959, Rieger still counts the four-year BOCES agricultural program he completed there as a key to his longevity in agriculture and business. It was the first regional cooperative program offered by what was then the Saratoga BOCES.

"John is a true BOCES success story," says Frank Grimaldi, one of Rieger's colleagues on the Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex (WSWHE) BOCES board.

Rieger shows that in countless ways, Grimaldi notes, as he is constantly "paying it forward" as president of the WSWHE BOCES board.

Rieger started his school board service in 1963, when he was elected to the Schuylerville board. In the early 1980s, he became a member of the Saratoga-Washington BOCES, which eventually became the WSWHE BOCES.

Now, his dedication to school board work has earned him another title. He is the 2018 recipient of NYSSBA's Everett R. Dyer Award for Distinguished School Board Service.

"John consistently encourages innovation and welcomes new ideas," said NYSSBA President William Miller. "His leadership has fostered a culture of serving component districts, and he has demonstrated exemplary dedication to the students from those districts."

"John cares about opportunities for students. That has always been his calling card," said WSWHE BOCES District Superintendent James Dexter.

That priority was clear when Rieger, 77, introduced a reporter to two young employees who recently completed CTE programs at the WSWHE BOCES.

Schuylerville High School graduate Xavier Jones, 18, completed the HVAC-R (heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration) program this year and was working at Rieger's business for the summer before heading to Marine Corps recruit training in the fall.

Jones plans to serve in the Marine Corps Reserve and attend college at SUNY Delhi, and he said the summer job was a nice fit. "I wind up doing a little bit



2018 Dyer Award winner John Rieger, left, stands amid his testing ground for vegetable plants with recent BOCES graduate Xavier Jones, a summer employee at Rieger's business in Greenwich.

Photo by Maribeth Macica, WSWHE BOCES

of everything here," he said with a broad smile.

Inside, 19-year-old Michael Morin, who completed the heavy equipment operation and maintenance program, helped Rieger lift one of the super-size chainsaws displayed on a store shelf. Morin repairs many kinds of equipment at Country Power.

"It's always something different," Morin said. "You have to find the problem and figure out what caused it. What went wrong? How did it happen?"

Rieger says the two young workers illustrate what inspires him to continue his school board service.

Rieger's colleagues say he is attentive to rapid changes in industry standards, consumer demand and technology. At an age when many of his contemporaries

have retired, they say he remains insistent about keeping programs relevant.

"John encourages innovation, even though he's been around a long time," Dexter said.

With leadership and support from Rieger, president for the past eight years, WSWHE BOCES has cultivated a long list of expanding options in Career and Technical Education (CTE), including an Early College Career Academy with programs in advanced manufacturing, news media, information technology and computer networking, and business and entrepreneurship.

Dexter said Rieger and his fellow board members are reliable advocates for updating curriculum and equipment to meet employer needs in CTE programs that also include automotive technology,

construction trades, criminal justice, horse care and horticulture.

Under Rieger's leadership, the board has supported enhancements to the Exceptional Learners Division for students with disabilities, including expanded internships, and other initiatives to meet the needs of 31 member school districts.

"John has been a constant support in creating a culture of serving component districts," Dexter said.

Board members praise Rieger's talent for building personal relationships with component districts and the community. He serves in leadership roles with regional school board groups and organizations that include the Greater Adirondack Resource, Conservation and Development Council; the Washington County Soil and Water Conservation District; and the county Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board. He is a regular presence at open houses, graduations, skills competitions and other student events.

"John is everywhere," board vice president Lin L. King marveled in a letter endorsing Rieger's Dyer Award nomination.

Recently, colleagues say his advocacy fueled creation of a new showcase for BOCES student skills at the Washington County fair.

"John is the kind of guy who doesn't sit back and wait for stuff to happen," said Schuylerville Board President John Macica.

Rieger said the greatest change he has noticed in 55 years of school board service has been the increased need for training and understanding of subjects such as school law, board governance, fiscal oversight and policy. That's an aspect of the work, he said, in which he has appreciated NYSSBA.

"You have to make a commitment to be prepared in so many ways," he said, and NYSSBA "is a ready resource to deal with almost any type of situation."

Nonetheless, he believes the chief mission and importance of school board members remains unchanged from when he was a high school student and a young board member in the 1960s.

"Realistically, what we did back then is what's going on today in our BOCES," he said. "I look back and I see the foresight of the administrators and the school boards. They were focused on filling needs. I was one of those kids who was helped by that vision, and I hope I can play a part in it now."

Rieger will be honored at the Opening Session of NYSSBA's 99th Annual Convention & Education Expo. The session starts at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 25 in the New York Hilton's Grand Ballroom.



2018 Dyer Award winner John Rieger, left, talks about small engine diagnostics with employee Michael Morin, a BOCES alum who repairs equipment at Country Power Products.

Photo by Maribeth Macica, WSWHE BOCES