

'Outstanding Woman' has diverse background

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.
gcunninghamcitizen.com

Eliza Leadbeater is probably best-known for her work in building the economic bridges that have helped turn some the Lakes Region vacant mills into thriving centers of business.

However, what many people might not know is that the longtime head of the Belknap County Economic Development Council and recent winner of a prestigious Business Leader award also has been a teacher, antique shop owner, author, college assistant and even a sheep herder.

Leadbeater most recently was recognized by the N.H. Business Review and Laconia Savings Bank as a winner of the 2007 Outstanding Women in Business Awards — a program that recognizes the significant achievements of female leaders in the Granite State's business community.

Leadbeater has been at the helm of the BCEDC since its inception and came to the Lakes Region in July 1992 when the program was little more than a fledgling idea to boost business in the region.

"They emptied a closet and put a desk in it from the county jail. I went and took a chair out of a courtroom upstairs ... there were eight pieces of paper on the desk and a checkbook with \$200," said Leadbeater with a laugh.

Since then, the BCEDC has made huge strides under Leadbeater's lead. She has played a huge part, working in the spotlight and behind the scenes to bring in business to the region and 11 counties represented by the organization.

Since its start, the economic development outfit has lent upwards of \$6 million to local businesses and has helped facilitate the moves of major companies like J. Jill into the region.

Leadbeater said she probably is most proud of the multiple effort involving

the restoration of vacant mills around a Belknap County that once thrived with factories as the center of industry.

The Belknap County Economic Development Council has played a part in the restoration of the Belmont Mill, the mill that is now Riverfront Place in Tilton and the recent effort that has turned Laconia's Allen-Rogers factory into luxury condominiums.

Leadbeater's group was involved in turning the Brox Building on Union Avenue into a children's center and apartment complex with the Laconia Housing Authority.

"Really, what our job is is to find new uses and bring people together to the table who can do it," said Leadbeater.

The longtime advocate said she sees her role as that of a facilitator who works with private business people to help initiate progress and the creation of jobs in an area that, like many, was struggling during the 1990s.

Leadbeater said her focus on vacant mills has centered around her belief that such historic buildings remain important.

"They are still centers of the economy," said Leadbeater.

Her work in the local economy has been substantial, but is only one chapter in a life that has seen her undertaking a diverse set of jobs and personal interests.

Leadbeater was born in New York City and grew up in an urban setting that was far different than the New Hampshire that has become her home. She spent summer in Newport, R.I., when she was growing up.

She attended her undergraduate studies at the State University of New York-Cortland where she studied Outdoor Recreational Administration, a course of study that she thought would have her working with youths.

"It was in the '60s when we thought people would have lots of leisure time," said Leadbeater with a laugh.

Leadbeater later moved to England where she lived for 15 years in a 16th century home in Cheshire County's Whitegate Village where she owned businesses and taught in the slums of Liverpool.

She returned to the United States in 1982 where she took jobs in New Hampshire and Vermont as a teacher and assistant to college administrators at various schools.

She also has owned an antique shop and her passions include gardening, kayaking and hand-spinning — a topic she has written books about.

It was while she was working with an economic development organization in Vermont that she happened upon an advertisement for the Belknap County position that has seen her making connections with hundreds of business leaders in the Lakes Region.

Leadbeater said her recent recognition as a New Hampshire leader in business was a huge surprise.

"It's very nice. There are a tremendous number of people in the state who are involved in making it a better place. It's a truly great honor and I was quite speechless when I heard about it," said Leadbeater.

When asked about the distinction being tied to her gender, Leadbeater responded that it is rewarding but she noted that it has been her personality that has been the biggest driving factor in her accomplishments.

"It's not something I dwell on. Ever since I was a kid my approach has been, 'Let's get on and get it done.' I've always been about finding solutions," said Leadbeater.

She said her work with the BCEDC has witnessed some disappointments when she thought, "if only some people have believed a little more," but she said the group has made big contributions.