

New Riverside chief honored by chance to lead

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER



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Deb Thomas, the new president of Riverside Industries, speaks with Riverside client Jon Powell, right, and his employer, Kevin Martin, director of dining services at the Williston Northampton School's Birch Dining Commons at Ford Hall.

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EASTHAMPTON - Deb Thomas, longtime manager and now president of Riverside Industries, looked out at the Nashawannuck Pond from her new office window, pondering a question about what it is like to be the agency's new president.

She folded her hands, took a deep breath and paused before replying.

"Riverside has been my heart and inspiration for 32 years," said Thomas. "To be given the challenge to see how Riverside can grow even more is an honor."

Thomas, who has worked at Riverside on and off for about three decades, was tapped earlier this month to replace Ron Bittel, the agency's longtime chief who retired in September.

"Ron left very large shoes to fill and I am blessed to have had him mentor me for 30 years," Thomas said.

Thomas, who was named president Oct. 1, is now responsible for the human-service agency that employs between 150 and 200 people in a 167,000-square-foot mill building on Cottage Street on a budget of more than \$7 million.

Before Bittel retired last month, a strategic plan committee interviewed 400 people affiliated with Riverside over three months to outline the organization's agenda for the next three years.

Thomas is now seeking ideas to add to that plan, she said. Over two to four breakfasts and lunches a week, from now until mid-November, Thomas plans to talk with at least 100 so-called stakeholders - social service lingo for the people Riverside supports and their employers, funders, business owners, tenants, staff members and community leaders.

She is seeking to learn about their hopes, concerns and thoughts for Riverside's future, ideas that will be incorporated into the strategic plan made by the management team, staff and board and into Thomas's plan for her first 100 days.

The meetings, said Thomas, "bring freshness to us." She was speaking to the Gazette during a second interview in her new office, where her own personality and leadership style is starting to emerge. On one shelf sits a toy stuffed moose that was given to her by colleagues after she drove by a real moose on a road two years ago. On the walls are newspaper clippings of photos of Queenie and Flora, cats belonging to Tony Sadlowski, who works in the production department at Riverside. A table and two chairs have been added to the room, on the other side of her desk.

"I do know what it's like to be on this side," said Thomas. She noted that, as manager, she used to put her papers on her lap when visiting the president, and a little round table seemed convenient for visitors to organize their papers.

At Bittel's retirement party in September, many people said that they think Thomas is well-suited for the position.

"I've known her for almost 20 years and she's been great to work with," said Joann Donnelly, vice president for rehabilitation at the agency. "She's extremely dedicated, hardworking and productive, and I look forward to working with her and seeing where things will go in the future."

The first breakfast was held last Tuesday in Thomas' conference room, where six people joined Thomas for a round-table discussion - including the parents of a man whose son participates in Riverside's day program, a clinician, a board members and an employee.

"The breakfast was great," Thomas said. "Seven is a nice number; everybody had a chance to speak and share."

Among the suggestions: finding ways for people with developmental disabilities to engage in civic-minded activities, developing Riverside's line of products and involving people in advocating for changes in federal laws.

Jon Hurwitz, a tennis coach at Amherst College, where eight developmentally disabled people who Riverside supports work, suggested collaborating with the athletic director, Suzanne Coffey, to make an after-work tennis program. The group discussed creating a greenhouse in order to sell wholesale plants to smaller greenhouses, like Baystate Perennial Farm, Thomas said.

"It's a really exciting time," said Thomas. "Just to have seen Riverside grow from being a grassroots organization to a new stage of organizational development. We've always had a presence in the community, and it seems like we're busting out into it more."

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