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# Sizzling Synergy

*Chris Wood, as president of Davis & Elkins College, and Lisa Messinger Wood, as executive director of the Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce, are leveraging the natural synergies between a college and its community to make both stronger.*

interviewed by PAM KASEY

photographed by JOSH TRIGGS



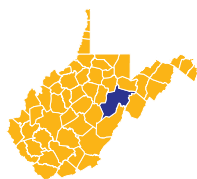
**WHEN HUNTINGTON NATIVES** Chris and Lisa Messinger Wood moved with their two daughters to North Carolina in 2006 for his new career in higher education administration, he already had a couple decades' background as a United Methodist pastor and as director of Mission West Virginia. Messinger Wood pursued her vocation in elementary regular and special education in North Carolina, and then in Delaware when his work took them there. But they missed their West Virginia home. So when the presidency at Davis & Elkins College came open in 2016, they jumped at it.

"We knew the school well and loved that it's a church-related school, and it was back here among the roots we know so well," Wood says. "Also, my background is in college fundraising, and the College was in the middle of a \$100 million capital campaign. It was an opportunity I could not pass up."

The couple relished their new life as D&E's president and first lady. And Messinger Wood joined the board of Elkins Main Street, where she soon came to appreciate the tight interdependence between the College and the community. When the directorship of the Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce opened up in 2018, she applied with enthusiasm and was hired.

Just before Messinger Wood came on at the Chamber, the community had embarked on a study of Quint Studer's book *Building a Vibrant Community*. The Chamber, on her watch, distributed so many copies that Studer conducted a workshop in Elkins in March 2020. His insights are serving as the foundation for an energizing community dialogue, Messinger Wood says, with 10 task forces shaping the ideas into concrete projects.

Collaboration runs deep these days in Elkins and Randolph County, and town-grown relations are at a high.



**You've been busy! Tell us what's happened at D&E in your first four-plus years.**

**CW** The capital campaign raised \$101.4 million, and the college was able to retire all of its debt. That's critical for sustaining the future of the institution. Thanks to donors, we've done some new construction, including a \$6.7 million addition to our arts center. And we've added new programs and new athletic teams—all to create the strongest possible experience for students.

**What is the focus at the Chamber?**

**LMW** Randolph County offers a beautiful playground for tourists and guests, and we also want it to be a place where our residents can live and work and, really, stay here. I hate hearing about young people who leave because they think they can have better lives somewhere else. We've lived in other places—the things that are here are equally wonderful. That's why the Chamber has embraced the movement to become a vibrant community.

**CW** When Quint was here, he was able to say from an outside perspective, "I hope everybody here realizes the resources you already have." He talked about our strong health care system, the college environment, tourism—we just have to embrace all of that and build on it. As we come out of the pandemic, that conversation is going to drive the economic vitality for the region.

**What are your goals for D&E?**

**CW** Private higher education is highly competitive, so not only financial stability but enrollment stability is important. I want D&E to continue to be known as a place for quality academics and a transformational educational experience. And I want Elkins and Randolph County to be as strong and vibrant as they can be, because that's good for D&E and recruitment.

**What are you looking forward to?**

**LMW** Elkins is one of the Mon Forest Towns so, working together with the Mon National Forest, with Davis Health System, with the hardwood industry and all of the business community—and with the College—I think we're just on the precipice of some exciting things.