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Don't Judge a Bank by Its Cover

Intimidating. Greedy. Corporate. Boring. Scary. These are all the words I thought about banking before attending VBA Bank Day at First Bank & Trust Company in Abingdon, Virginia. However, after I attended VBA Bank Day, the words that come to my mind now are: *Community, Generous, Friendly, Helpful, and Exciting.* All of the things I learned at VBA Bank Day showcases how crucial banks are to the communities that they serve, while at the same time teaching high schoolers the importance of financial literacy and making good financial decisions. Through my positive experience at VBA Bank Day, I found that banking goes beyond debits and credits; it is a vital resource that enables community growth, enhances financial literacy, and prepares young people to make prudent financial decisions.

When President and CEO, Mark Nelson referenced First Bank & Trust Company being a community bank, it made me think deeper about the term “community.” In communities that surround banks, it is more than helping customers with their transactions. Not only do banks provide loans for small businesses or loans for first-time homebuyers, they also play an essential role in helping communities in times of need. An example of how community banks support the communities they serve is when First Bank & Trust Company provided almost \$350,000 in relief efforts to cope with the disasters of Hurricane Helene and provided approximately \$667,000 to worthy charitable foundations. As someone who lives in an area that was hardest hit and saw first hand the damages, it means so much more that a bank would be generous enough to donate that much money to people in need. When one banks with a community bank and provides them with business, the bank in turn uses those profits to help their communities. After always thinking banks were just in it for profit, their unselfish actions proved to me that they are willing to give back to their communities to make a positive impact.

As a young adult, I have never known the complexities of how banking really works. I have always been intimidated by the fancy buildings, the fancy suits, and all the zeros after a number. Over the years, questions for my parents like, “what is a mortgage?” or, “how does interest work?” have accumulated. I was hoping for the day when I could get a glimpse into the financial world and that came to fruition on VBA Bank Day. Maintaining a good credit score and establishing a 529 Plan were two of the major things I learned about managing my financial future. Mr. Cahill, a Loan Officer, mentioned that having a good credit score is one of the most important things an individual can achieve when it comes to finances, as it makes purchasing tangibles much easier. Timely payments, payment history, credit card usage, and length of credit

all formulate to make up a good credit score. After learning this, I will start building my credit score as soon as I can. This will help me in the future as I purchase my first home and vehicle. Setting up a 529 Plan is another financial tip I learned from Trust Officer, Ms. Waters, that will help me and my future family with education expenses. I am so glad I now have this knowledge under my belt, considering college costs an arm and a leg. She also emphasized that I need to transition my assets into investments for retirement as soon as possible so that the value in that account will increase over time - the more time I have in the market, the better. After meeting so many knowledgeable employees at First Bank & Trust Company, it made me feel less intimidated by banking, leading me to realize that they are truly dedicated to being helpful and friendly. Through the information that was given to me by the employees, I quickly understood that banks are not only in existence to make money for their own good, but to help customers earn money for *their* own good.

At VBA Bank Day I took away multiple ideas that will guide me throughout my financial journey, but I also took away some important life lessons. When President and CEO Mark Nelson closed the day, he ended with this comment: "Be honest with yourself and utilize your God-given talents to be a difference maker and never sacrifice your values." When the leader of the bank has this kind of philosophy, the bank cannot help but be focused towards *community, generosity, friendliness, and helpfulness*. Having this positive experience at VBA Bank Day debunked all the negative misconceptions I had about banking, and has even led me to explore banking careers, including the opportunity to work at First Bank & Trust Company this summer as a Teller. I know that VBA Bank Day will have a far-reaching impact on my future as it will help me navigate financial decisions and encourage me to find ways to give back to the community - just like banks do.