



Heart of Steele



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'I want to sew and go'

Christianson maintains busy life despite challenges

BY KAY FATE

As Linda Christianson talks with a visitor at her dining room table, she glances often at an empty recliner in the adjoining living room.

"There I go, looking over there again," she said, shaking her head. "I sit in that other chair in the evenings and look at that chair all night long ... but there's nothing you can do."

It was the spot usually occupied by Nolan Christianson, her husband of 56 years. He died Jan. 8, the day before his 77th birthday.

He was diagnosed with cognitive impairment in 2019; Linda cared for him as the illness slowly progressed.

Nolan's condition began to deteriorate in earnest in November.

"Every single week, he was declining very, very quickly," Linda said, "but he would never, never complain. I'd hear him say, 'I am so sick of this,' and I would answer, 'I am, too.' It's just, what else? We'll go to the end, my dear."

In five weeks, "he went from walking to ... nothing," she said.

The couple had a wonderful Christmas with their family; the next day, he was hospitalized.

A week later, Nolan was home, "and we did very, very well" with hospice and family care in his final days, Linda said.

"He always knew everybody; he never lost us," she said. "We always had him. It was a gift. All he wanted was to be home."

Christianson was headed to her first grief support group the day after her visit at the dining room table, but not necessarily for herself.

"I think maybe I can help someone else," she said, "because I'm doing pretty good. I feel relieved. I'm very sad in the evening, and it will hit me just out of the clear blue. I'll be driving home ... and I'll just start to cry."

"I don't know what brings it on," she said, "but he's released. He's finally free from Alzheimer's."

Sew and go

Christianson's plan after years of caregiving, she said, are "to sew, and go."

There are quilts to be made, prom dresses to be altered and hardanger to revisit.

She's had up to 22 prom dresses to alter in a single prom season. Last year, it was "only" six. She already has two, and prom is still several weeks away.

Her favorite thing to do is "any of the fancy dresses. I mean, I've done tons of jeans and shortened pants and fixed zippers and waistbands, but I love doing the fancy stuff."

Christianson has made just one wedding gown, "but I have altered probably 50. One year, I had three September brides, so I was working all summer long."

She recently created a three-generation baptismal gown from the puffy sleeves of the baby's great-grandmother's wedding dress; the train of the grandmother's wedding dress, and the lining of the mother's wedding dress.

"It's absolutely the most beautiful thing I have done," Christianson said. "I don't even have a picture of it yet, because I'm waiting to have the baby in it."

The biggest challenge, she said, was not ruining the grandmother's dress – because the baby's aunt



Linda Christianson

would like to wear the dress for her own wedding.

"I had months before I dared cut into it," she said. "It just hung there, because I couldn't figure out in my mind how I was going to do this and not wreck the dress."

Christianson did much of her needlework while raising three children, "and I haven't had time since."

She has several projects in mind for special occasions.

There is a rack on the rear of Christianson's car so she can take her motorized scooter with her, "so maybe this summer I'll get to a fair, or I'll get somewhere."

Christianson also wants to go "on a mystery trip, a three-day, two-night trip, just get away,

hopefully take my scooter. I can find a friend that would want to do that with me, and just go."

Trips can be a challenge, she said, "because I go with a lot" of equipment.

She takes folding crutches that fit in a lawn chair bag "so I can travel with them."

She needs them when she removes her four-pound leg brace at night.

Youngest to oldest
Christianson doesn't know a life without the equipment.

On Oct. 1, 1948, she was the latest Mower County polio victim, at just six months old.

Several weeks earlier, her parents had attended a farm auction in Wells.

"Dad was looking at farm machinery and Mom was looking at a sewing machine," Christianson said. "It was a big group of people in August – and polio was most prevalent in the summer months."

From 1916 onward, a polio epidemic appeared each summer in at least one part of the country, with the most serious occurring in the 1940s and 1950s.

"They closed down state fairs, they closed down movie theaters; you couldn't go to swimming pools," Christianson said. "It was hot, and the virus just grew so fast."

Her parents believe they brought it home from that August auction.

"My medical records show the first of several doctor appointments was Sept. 12, 1948, and by Oct. 1, they said, 'don't even call. Just show up at Mayo, because they're so full they won't take you; they'll send you to the Cities. So don't call; just show up.'"

That's exactly what her mother did; Christianson spent the next 14 months at Saint Marys Hospital in Rochester.

Visitors were allowed only on Sundays.

Her "crib partner" was Jenny Goldberg, from

"You don't succeed if you aren't (independent), when you carry what I carry with me."

Linda Christianson

Polio Survivor

Austin, who later moved to Washington state.

Christianson and Goldberg met in person just once after leaving the hospital, when Goldberg returned to Minnesota for a visit.

"Her right leg was affected, and my left leg was, so when we walked toward each other, we both limped the same direction," Christianson said of their meeting.

Goldberg died recently, as did Peg Kehret, a native of Brownsdale who contracted polio in 1949, when she was 12.

Kehret would later become an award-winning author, including a memoir about having polio.

The three women remained in contact until the end.

"I think I'm close to being the oldest living polio survivor," Christianson said.

It was 1955 before a polio vaccine was widely used.

"I had to line up and get my vaccine, just like everybody else," Christianson said, "because my folks treated me like everybody else. I was never different. They never said, 'no, you can't try this, you can't try that,' and I had to become a very strong, stubborn person."

The obstacles

"My dad tried to fence me in, and I just took that little crutch and lifted the

latch and was gone," she said of her childhood. "So they finally took the fence down. And I've just gone from that point to this. Don't fence her in, because she isn't gonna stay put."

She grew up five miles west of Lansing Corners and attended O'Leary Country School in Freeborn County until fourth grade; the family lived in Pine City for a couple of years, then returned to the Blooming Prairie area.

She started school there as a sixth-grader, using crutches to climb the two flights of stairs daily.

Christianson anticipated the next question.

"Yes, I was bullied," she said. "When I was in seventh grade, I had to go into the office and talk to Mr. McFarlin, because the boys were calling me 'Chester,' a 'Gunsmoke' character with a pronounced limp.

Her parents never spoke a word about it, Christianson said, "but you know darn well he would have called them and said, 'your daughter was in to talk to me today.'"

It was, she agreed, likely part of their plan to make her independent.

Sports weren't available for girls when Christianson was growing up, "and if they were, it was one night a month or something," she said. "And I couldn't be part of that."



She could, however, attend Camp Courage in Maple Lake, and was one of the first campers to do so; she went every summer from the early 50s, calling it "a great part of my life."

Christianson had the last of her 13 surgeries the summer between her freshman and sophomore years of high school; she worked at Camp Courage the summers after her junior and senior years.

"I had lots and lots of orthopedic surgeries, moving muscles ... tendons; both of my ankles

are fused," she said. "I was without crutches, canes and braces from age 16."

That lasted 20 years.

Getting involved

When she was 36, "then that left knee just didn't work anymore," Christianson said. "It was all wore out," the tendons and muscles unable to keep it straight.

When her youngest child was 3, Christianson had to go back into a brace. It runs from hip to toe of her left leg.

By then she had gotten married and gone to school to be a registered dental

assistant, a profession she worked in for 42 years.

She and her husband owned Nolan's Interiors in downtown Blooming Prairie for several years; Christianson made curtains and other items, worked three days a week at the dental office, had two young children and a newborn.

One of Dr. Flor's first two employees at Main Street Dental in Blooming Prairie, Christianson stayed there for 23 years before working at a practice in Austin.

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PURPLE HEART CANE

Coxworth walks a little more proudly

"I signed my life away to take a bullet for my country."

Ray Coxworth

Purple Heart Cane Recipient

BY HOWARD LESTRUD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On a cold January day, Ray Coxworth walked toward his rural Ellendale mailbox, guided by his two family dogs, Lucky and Little. Coxworth was hoping to find a special delivery: a walking cane to commemorate his military service in Vietnam during the late 1960s.

When he opened the package, air-mailed from Florida, he found a hand-carved piece of artwork from the Purple Heart Cane Project, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Coxworth, 77, grew emotional as he examined the 32-inch cane, specifically the large eagle's head at the top and the carvings of his war ribbons, citations, and medals.

Coxworth was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968, serving from May 28, 1968, to May 27, 1970.

"I signed my life away to take a bullet for my country," he said.

Ordered by Freeborn County Judge William Sturtz to report to the U.S. Army First Cavalry, Coxworth soon found himself in the middle of combat as a rifleman, machine gunner and mortar carrier.

He still recalls the instant smell of death upon landing in Vietnam and the intense heat of the jungle patrols, where he carried 300 rounds of ammunition and grenades.

"You lived for the moment and never thought about the future," Coxworth noted, mentioning the prevalence of Agent Orange and the lasting impact of the war.

Upon returning home, he noted that troops did not receive a warm welcome. "We were treated poorly when we returned. The 'thank yous' are finally coming, 50 years later."

After the war, Coxworth married, had a son and opened his own business. While he says he has buried many memories deep, the new cane serves as a significant tribute to his service.

The Purple Heart Cane Project began in Oklahoma and has since spread to carving clubs nationwide.

Each cane is personalized with a veteran's name, rank, unit and awards. The canes are presented annually at the National SEAL Museum.

The carving club behind these gifts meets weekly in Fort Pierce, Florida, where members volunteer to carve at least two eagle-head canes per year.



PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Ray Coxworth recently received a cane mailed to him by the Purple Heart Cane Project. He is shown here with the owner of the Ellendale Cafe.

‘A SERVANT’S HEART’

Wacek focuses on various community groups

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

For Nicole Wacek, a life-long Steele County resident, helping others has always been a part of her life. Although she has stepped back some in the last year, Wacek said she has been involved with the projects of the Moonlighters Exchange Club of Owatonna, the Veterans Memorial in Owatonna and the Steele County Humane Society.

“I did a lot more about a year ago,” she said. “I have stepped back.” Her mother died last year, she said, and she needed some time and hopes to get more involved again.

Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric (SWCE) in

the finance department. She worked in banking for 20-plus years and at an assisted living/memory care facility for three years during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has been with SWCE since 2022.

Wacek grew up in Blooming Prairie in a large family that was active in the Methodist Church. She continues to help out at the church, she said.

Her mother always said she “had a servant’s heart,” Wacek said.

Her family is now her and her father, she added.

Getting the Veterans Memorial completed was a passion of Wacek’s, and the Moonlighters Exchange Club was very involved throughout the process. On a personal

basis, she said, the memorial was important to her because both her grandfathers had served in the military and she had been really good friends with Mike and Trudy Pierce.

The Humane Society has also been one of the organizations she supports and, in the past, has served on the board.

Despite cutting back somewhat on her activities, Wacek said she is still involved including the Moonlighters Exchange Club.

Wacek bought her parents’ hobby farm, where she now lives, and is currently on the Deerfield Township Board.

“I like to help people if I can and give back in time or money,” said Wacek.



Nicole Wacek, left, hugs Trudy Pierce during the Owatonna Veterans Memorial open house in 2023.



As a member of the Moonlighter’s Exchange Club of Owatonna, Nicole Wacek has been heavily involved in the Owatonna Veterans Memorial.

'You've got to fill that town niche'

Anhorn contributes through business, community work

BY KAY FATE

John Anhorn remembers the time someone was paging through an old high school yearbook, pointing to photo after photo of Anhorn's participation.

A 1992 graduate of Medford High School, he was the valedictorian of his class, played baseball and basketball, was in band and choir, and was a member of multiple clubs and organizations.

The friend looked at Anhorn and asked, "is there anything you weren't in?"

Some things never change.

Now the third-generation owner of his family's business, Anhorn can be found in almost every corner of Medford.

He just marked his 31st year as a firefighter, serving as training officer for 17 years; he's a two-term member of the Medford School Board, now in his second year as the board chair.

Anhorn is a member of the Medford Knights of Columbus and an active member of Christ the King Catholic Church. He is a former board member of the Medford Civic Club and a member of the town's Economic Development Authority, instrumental in bringing the electronic sign to the intersection of Main Street and Central Avenue.

He and his family host the car show during Straight River Days; Anhorn started attending city council meetings in earnest during the build-up to the city's large Main Street road improvement project.

He had plenty at stake, he said, with an entire block of businesses on the street; his mother lived on Main Street – and so do Anhorn and his family.

"My commute is a long one," he joked.

"Really, I like a project," Anhorn said. "I don't just like going to meetings for the sake of having meetings. I want to

do something; let's accomplish something together."

Family history

In 1949, Tom Anhorn opened a Webb gas station in a 14-foot-wide shop on Main Street in Medford.

Just one hitch: Right next door – *right* next door – was a Standard gas station that had been around for a while.

Plenty of people, including the neighboring station's owner, told Tom he shouldn't bother, doubtful he would find success.

"My grandpa said, 'It's fine; I'll just pick up the stragglers,'" John said.

Anhorn's Webb, as it was known then, did just that.

In 75-plus years and two more generations of Anhorns, the business has expanded to fill the entirety of the 200 block of South Main Street – but still includes a version of the original tiny shop.

In fact, the front door of the business has never moved, and never will, said John.

Ever the entrepreneur, Tom opened a small root beer stand on the south side of his business, with food and drink delivered by carhops.

Bob Anhorn, who was nine when his father opened Anhorn's Webb, grew up in the station – and didn't even have to leave to find love.

He met his wife, Shirley, when she worked for his parents as a carhop next door. The couple took over the operation in 1981, renaming it Bob Anhorn Inc.

The third generation was just seven at the time, and was balancing tires in the shop by age eight.

"It was easy enough to do," said John, who described himself as his father's shadow.

"I was just always around here," he said, but that didn't mean the line of succession was a guarantee.

Teacher to tires

In fact, after high school graduation, John headed to college in Duluth with plans





of becoming a high school math teacher.

Still, his father needed his help at the station, so Anhorn drove home nearly every weekend, dropping riders off along the way, then picking them up on his way back to Duluth on Sunday evenings. The ad hoc transportation service paid for the gas for the 425-mile roundtrip.

Anhorn would arrive in Medford on Friday evening in time for his second part-time job: Driving a limo.

He worked Saturday at his father's station, then was back in the limo's driver's seat on Saturday night. He would work part of the day Sunday, then hop in his car for the drive back to Duluth.

That schedule lasted about two years; when Shirley became ill in 1994, Bob Anhorn wondered if it was time to sell the business, so he could be there for his wife.

John came home to help in the interim, but it wasn't long before he realized it would be a permanent decision.

By then, he had met Cindy Schulz, of Waterville, who was working at McDonald's in Medford. She was going to college to be a dental hygienist when they met, paying for her schooling with that fast food job.

"I asked her out at

the drive-thru window," Anhorn said, "then had to loop back around to get her phone number. She wrote it on a napkin – and I still have that napkin."

The comparison to his own parents' love story isn't lost on him: "I married a modern-day carhop," Anhorn said.

The couple dated long distance for about a year and married in 1996; Cindy came to work at Anhorn's about six months later.

'Make it yours'

Bob Anhorn died on Christmas Eve 2001, "so I'm glad I had that time with him," Cindy said. "When he gave me his keys, he said, 'you do what you have to do to keep it going. You guys make it yours.'"

That included bringing things online with the station's first computer, as well as painting and freshening things up.

On one visit, Cindy said, Bob "had me grab him an ice cream treat, and he got to sit at the desk and look at everything, and he just had tears. He said, 'it looks so nice; you're doing the right thing.' To me, that was a lot of trust from him."

John and Cindy Anhorn are the only full-time employees at the station; a high schooler comes in to help clean part time.

They continued to be open seven days a week until after their second child was born; even the retired guys who played cards at the shop every morning recognized the couple's hard work.

"When John decided to close on Sundays, they said, 'we expected you to boot us out of here years ago. We've been waiting for you'" to take Sundays off, Cindy said.

Anhorn said he modeled himself after his father, who filled a need when and where he saw it; he knows his own children are watching his example.

Anhorn is proud of what the business has taught so many members of the family who have worked there throughout the years, he said, "and that's why I feel good about my kids, too. I think this place gives them a little molding on what the world is like, just relating to people."

He has an incredible memory, Cindy said, not just about the vehicles he's worked on, but about long-ago conversations.

"It's the Anhorn brain," John said. "My dad was that way, too."

His large tire inventory? "I have it in my head," he said. "I can tell you exactly how many of whatever



"I've always said, 'any organization that I'm in, I try to leave it better than it was when I came in.'"

John Anhorn

Medford Volunteer

er size I have. I don't need to reference a computer for that; it's all up there."

Past, present, future

Anhorn has totes full of photographs and other memorabilia dating back to that 1949 Anhorn's Webb station. Every project is documented photographically; there are several stories about the business in yellowing newspapers.

"I spent my entire life making this building look ... I mean, as you can see by all the different roof-lines, when they could, they added" space, he said. "So I've spent my entire life trying to make this look like one big building, and I think I've done an OK job with that."

The projects continue: Anhorn's will close for

six weeks this summer to redo the pumps, reducing the number from 11 to six, but increasing the number of products on each pump.

Still, he said, "there could come a day when it does get split up, so even when I do this project this summer, where I'm orienting the pumps," the building could be sectioned off

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A CONSTANT IN OWATONNA

Decades later and Starman is still helping the community

BY ALEX MALM

A lot has changed about Owatonna since Wayne Starman moved to town decades ago.

When he first moved, the population was about half the size it is now.

But through it all, one thing has remained consistent: Starman's dedication to helping Owatonna.

His roots

Starman was born and raised outside of Blooming Prairie and graduated from Dodge Center High School in 1957.

He went on to join the service, spending six months in Missouri for basic training for the National Guard.

He couldn't find work when he came back from the service.

When Starman was in high school, his dad worked for a small construction company, while also farming.

"My dad worked with (the owner), so I worked weekends and summers for my sophomore, junior and senior summers. Of course back then, construction pretty much shut down when the winter season came," Starman said, "so I went to town looking for a job and ended up in a grocery



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Wayne Starman performs a little dance with Kelly Boomgarden as he presented her with the Wayne Starman Ambassador of the Year Award in January.

store on the south end of Owatonna.”

The store’s name was Duffy’s Fairway.

It was December of 1958. A young man looking for work after high school didn’t know it would turn into an almost seven-decade career in the business.

He certainly didn’t see what would come next.

From employee to owner

For years, Starman worked for a man named Duffy Hamren; in 1980, he bought the business and renamed it Wayne’s Fairway.

He owned it for a decade, then sold it to Coborn’s Inc. in 1990 – and became manager at the store, now Cash Wise Foods.

He continued to run the store until 2005, when he retired – sort of.

“I still work a couple mornings a week, put in

about 10 hours a week, and I love it,” Starman said of his grocery career.

He said it helps him stay involved.

“I get to see my old customers and interact with them, so I like it,” Starman said.

Throughout all those years, Starman said he has always made serving the community a big part of what he does.

Chamber Of Commerce

Starman said he first became involved with civic duties in the 70s, while he was working for Hamren, getting involved with the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce.

When he bought the business in 1980, he joined the Chamber and has been a member ever since.

“Continually, it’s been 46 years that I’ve been involved with the Chamber,” Starman said.

In 1989, he became a board member, where he served for 12 years, including serving on the Owatonna Ambassadors, a group who help celebrate new businesses and ones who are celebrating milestones.

“I’ve been an ambassador for 36 years... I’m now what is called an emeritus,” Starman said, explaining after 20 years, those who serve as ambassadors are able to earn emeritus status.

“I’m happy staying involved with the Chamber,” Starman said. “I’ve also been active in the (American) Legion for 46 years. I’ve been an Elk for 47 years. I’ve been involved in the Lions Club for 45 years. I’ve been a member of the Knights of Columbus for 48 years,” Starman said.

Starman is an American Veteran with the

VFW, which means he is a military veteran, but was not called to duty. He was active with the National Guard from 1958 to 1964.

Chamber sees value

One person who has gotten to know Starman over the years is Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Meier.

“Wayne Starman is a tireless advocate for this community through his consistent volunteerism. He specifically puts an enormous amount of time in with the VFW and the color guard, honoring veterans and serving the community through their programming,” Meier said.

“For the Chamber, Wayne is active on a daily basis. He is an ambassador, helping welcome new businesses to the Chamber and to the community. He finds a way to connect

people to support them as businesses here in the community,” Meier said.

“Wayne has served many years on the Chamber board of directors, helping guide the organization with a focus on the needs of the individual businesses.

“The Chamber thinks so highly of Wayne that we have an award named in his honor, called the Wayne Starman Ambassador of the Year Award, which recognizes the ambassador who has done the most over the course of the year.”

Meier said Starman “does all of this because he loves to be involved, and he loves the community. He isn’t seeking recognition but does it because he wants to.”

But Starman knows his commitment to the community isn’t possible without his family.

Family by his side

Starman enjoys people.

“I enjoy contact with my customers... I think back, in the 90s when I owned my own store, I owe a lot of the credit to my success, our success, (to) my family,” Starman said.

His family includes Janet, his wife of 65 years, and his children, many of whom he got to work with at the grocery store.

But there is another family to whom he owes a lot of credit.

“I owe most everything I learned... as far as the business was concerned, from Duffy Hamren, who owned the store that I worked for” for more than 20 years, Starman said.

Decades later, one thing has remained the same in Owatonna: Starman wants to help his community.

“I think I’ll continue to as long as I’m capable,” Starman said.

Christianson maintains busy life despite challenges

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When she retired, someone asked her what she was going to do.

“And I said, ‘I’m going to write a book.’”

Christianson retired in 2009; “All the Steps I Have Taken: Then and Now” was published in 2012.

She has eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, who all live close.

Among her activities are making quilts for the Blooming Prairie Chapter of Quilts of Valor; Christianson estimates she’s

made about a dozen for area veterans.

“I try to do one a year, if I can,” she said. “I’ve already got a request for one” for this year.

She drives a van for special needs kids in the BP district during the school year, and for three weeks of summer school; she is a member of Friends of the Library, helping with book sales and making Boomerang Bags used at the circulation desk.

When her children were young, she was a 4-H

leader and Sunday school teacher.

Christianson has delivered Meals on Wheels; she mends the American flag that flies at a local bank.

“I can hem them about three times” after trimming away the ragged edges; they are then retired through the Servicemen’s Club.

The patches on many BP firefighters’ shirts and jackets are sewn on by Christianson.

Christianson has been secretary of the Red Oak Grove Lutheran Church

women’s group for at least 16 years.

“You don’t get rid of that job until you die, you know,” she joked.

The group just voted to do its 85th strawberry social this summer; Christianson does the advertising, “and whatever else needs to be done.”

She is one of three chairpeople, “because we just don’t want to be” the deciding factor in ending the decades-long tradition, she said.

Though it’s a tremendous amount of work, it’s valu-

able, Christianson said, “because it pulls the few people you have left together.”

The lesson

Fifty years after she graduated from high school, Christianson received the Blooming Prairie Education Foundation’s distinguished service award; the same year, the Class of 1966 basketball team was honored.

When the event was over, Christianson said, “a couple of the boys came up to me and said they had never” teased her about the “Gunsmoke” character.

“I said, ‘I don’t know how many of you did, but it was enough that I didn’t like it.’ I took care of it.”

Christianson also seemed to sense another question, this one about childhood vaccination rates continuing to decline.

She shook her head.

“I firmly believe in vaccinations,” she said.

More than once, she has used herself as an example of the importance of having children vaccinated, sharing her story with reluctant parents and grandparents.

Christianson said being independent – stubborn, even – was important for her.

“You don’t succeed if you aren’t,” she said, “when you carry what I carry with me.”

For Vaillancourt, history with a heart

BY KAY FATE

In nearly every stage of her life, people have been showing up for Nancy Vaillancourt.

Chances are, it's because she shows up for them – though she waves the thought away.

Like many Steele County residents, Vaillancourt is an active volunteer, involved in many things.

She knows a lot of people.

"I'll talk to someone, and my kids will say, 'how do you know that person?' And I don't remember," she said.

Vaillancourt retired in September 2024 after spending more than 30 years in libraries in Steele County, first in Owatonna, then in Blooming Prairie.

More than 200 people showed up at her retirement party.

"I wish every single person in the world could have a day like that," Vaillancourt said, "where people come and express their gratitude. It was ... I really mean that: I wish everyone could have that experience. It was beautiful.

"And now that I've been dealing with the cancer, I felt it again, the same support," she said.

It is her second go-round with breast cancer; Vaillancourt will have a mastectomy this month.



When people learned about her upcoming surgery, "one of the ladies who's in charge of our women's group at church said, 'what do you need? I would do a meal train if you wanted, but I think you have so many friends, you don't need it.'"

Was the woman from church right?

She was, Vaillancourt admitted, "because people already have been so kind."

She's seen it since she got sick, a reminder of the friendships she has built throughout the area.

"I have hardly cried about having cancer," she

"I have hardly cried about having cancer. I just ... it would be ungrateful, knowing that there's so many people out there who care, while you're going through it."

Nancy Vaillancourt

Owatonna Area Volunteer

said. "I just ... it would be ungrateful, knowing that there's so many people out there who care, while you're going through it."

She was given a special blessing from some men at church before she

started chemotherapy, Vaillancourt said, "and then I just feel like I have so many people praying for me, and I feel lifted up, you know?"

The conversation drifted to a young family

Vaillancourt knows; she became friends with them while working at the BP Library.

"The reason I brought her up was at Christmas time, she contacted some people I knew in Bloom-

ing Prairie, then she came and had boxes of gifts for me. It was so kind.

"We have a little bond between us," Vaillancourt said.

She has bonds with many people, she agreed.

Like those people at her church, the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints, in Faribault.

Vaillancourt has been the organist there for most of the 46 years she’s attended.

She is also one of the regional representatives for the church’s women’s group, visiting different congregations to train and support them.

A talented musician, she has played piano for shows at Little Theatre of Owatonna.

After every medical appointment, Vaillancourt plays the grand piano in the lobby of Mayo’s Gonda building.

On the other end of the spectrum is her volunteer work as one of Owatonna’s “History Hags.”

Along with friend and fellow history buff Anne Peterson, the pair make frequent appearances around the county and beyond, sharing information about

the area they have discovered through deep research.

As the name might imply, the event is full of facts – and laughs.

“We’re having fun with that,” Vaillancourt said.

Their next presentation will involve Mineral Springs, “because we found a bunch of information that had kind of been hidden – about the park and the springs themselves.”

In addition to informing local and area residents about the near and distant past, “there is one thing I’ve accomplished: We’re getting the original statue of the native princess that had been at Mineral Springs” into the Steele County History Center, Vaillancourt said.

It has been in storage for about 30 years “in an undisclosed location.”

Since her involvement with the history center – more than 25 years now – “I have always felt that we needed to get more

information about Native Americans, and finally, it’s happening,” Vaillancourt said.

She also sits on the West Hills Commission, with a goal of preserving the vast history of the site, which contains the grounds and buildings of what was formerly known as the Minnesota State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children.

From 1886 to 1945, more than 10,000 children were sent to the facility that was once the third-largest institution of its kind in the nation.

One of the buildings now houses the Minnesota State Public School Orphanage Museum; Peterson is the director.

Vaillancourt and others have been working on a long-term project at West Hills, going through all the paperwork that’s been left from the museum and from the former Owatonna State School.

“There are over 10,000 children whose files we’re hoping to get some information from,” to further their long-forgotten history, she said.

Some families have written memories, and have also shared the official records with Vaillancourt and the others who are doing the documenting.

They’re working on a book now about the orphanage, with pictures of buildings and the changes over the years.

A second book will be written using the files they’re gathering now, “telling more of the stories about the orphanage and the children who lived there,” Vaillancourt said.

While she clearly loves history, it’s the children she’s thinking of.

“It just feels good to be remembering the children,” she said.

Some of their stories are tragic, including those of

multiple children who died and are buried in a small cemetery on the grounds.

“There is such heaviness,” Vaillancourt said, “and I think that’s why I want some justice. I want at least a light showing on it.”

It’s the same with her presentations about the KKK and its local history.

“I want people to know that it did happen, and we need to be careful,” Vaillancourt said.

She is also writing her own history, “for my grandchildren,” she said. “I’m calling it ‘Lessons Learned.’”

She has three children and three grandchildren.

Her family history is rich, with generations traced back to Luxembourg; she plans to take her grandchildren to visit next year.

With all that history, what about her future?

Vaillancourt has no designs on public office; she has been approached to run

for Owatonna City Council, “but no, thank you.”

It’s a word she seldom uses.

“I can’t say no,” she said. “I always think I have something to offer. I’ve always felt that I could make a difference somehow, and that’s what I’ve tried to do while raising my children, with my writing ... just being around people.”

Those contributions “help me to grow. I like to feel needed, that I can maybe help in some way,” Vaillancourt said.

She hopes to be fully recovered from surgery by May, “so that’s when I can get out and get in the garden.”

Radiation may continue through the summer, depending on her progress.

The prognosis, so far, is good.

“I feel like I’ve ... maybe this just means I have more to do,” she said.

Anhorn contributes through business, community work

◀ **ANHORN** from 7 for different businesses.

“This could be the C-store that goes with the gas pumps, and next door could be something else, you know?” Anhorn said.

Any new business will have big shoes to fill; there’s a little bit of everything at the store.

“You’ve got to fill that town niche,” he said. “I’m kind of the hardware store, the parts store ... I try to keep a little bit of

everything to help somebody,” he said.

Anhorn told a business class at Medford High School something very similar recently: “You’ve got to find a niche and you’ve got to fill it, and if you do a good job of that, you’re going to do OK.”

He also spoke about pride.

“To keep the family legacy going, I’m incredibly proud of that,” Anhorn said. “I told them there’s

some pride when it’s your name on your shirt, and not everybody gets that opportunity.”

In a town the size of Medford, it may come as no surprise that many of his customers have become his friends.

“Another thing I said at the school was, you’re only as good as the last job that rolled out of your place. The quality of work is paramount,” Anhorn said.

The right decision

The quality of work applies to Anhorn’s contributions to the community, as well.

“I’ve always said, ‘any organization that I’m in, I try to leave it better than it was when I came in.’ I think that’s what it’s all about,” he said. “I look at the generations (in Medford), and all those organizations need to keep going, so either you help them with something or you make it easier.”

Anhorn doesn’t expect to hang up any of the hats he currently wears anytime soon – and has no regrets about not becoming a teacher.

His training role with the fire department “scratched that itch,” he said, and his career has provided him the flexibility and independence to do what he does.

He’ll volunteer as long as he’s able.

“The stuff that I volunteer for? It doesn’t happen if my wife doesn’t let me do that, so I can’t say enough

about that,” Anhorn said. “I’m incredibly proud of my family,” which includes his daughter Julia, a ninth-grader, and Thomas, a sixth-grader.

“I do a lot for Medford, but Medford’s also done a lot for my family, too,” he said. “I love the small town atmosphere; I love our school,” which he said is reminiscent of a one-room schoolhouse.

Retirement is not on the horizon.

“I love this town,” Anhorn said. “Love it. All of my friends are here – why would I leave?”

'IT'S HEARTWARMING'

Hoffmann's volunteer work hits him close to the heart

BY RICK BUSSLER

For 35 years, Jim Hoffmann has dedicated himself to the Steele County Color Guard, and it's a duty he doesn't take lightly.

"It's satisfying to me and something that every veteran deserves," said Hoffmann, an original member of the Color Guard and who himself served in the Vietnam War.

Currently, there are 32 members in the local Color Guard. Hoffmann served as the commander of the group for about 25 years before turning over the reins a few years ago to Joe Falteysek. "They are just as dedicated as I am," Hoffmann said. "We feel a big relief to do it, even though it's sad."

The Steele County group performs at the funerals of area veterans. A squad of 13 members also travels to Fillmore County each month to the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in Preston for burials. The squad also travels periodically to Fort Snelling National Cemetery in the Twin Cities.

With great pride for the Color Guard, Hoffmann points out how Steele County's group was the first of its kind in Minnesota.

Hoffmann is prepared to stay with the Color Guard as long as he lives. "Nobody ever gets off it until you pass away," he said.

Besides his involvement with the Color Guard, Hoffmann is especially known for his involvement with the Owatonna Veterans Memorial. Prior to the unveiling in 2023, he had donated 1,400 hours to construction of the memorial.

But his work didn't stop once the memorial was dedicated. Since 2023, Hoffmann has worked on adding a sidewalk off 18th Street near the memorial and helped last year with adding bronze statutes.

With the addition of the statutes, Hoffmann said, "I am pretty much done with it."

He is especially proud of the memorial and what it means for area veterans and their families. "It's wonderful. It's just wonderful for all the veterans," Hoffmann said. "With all the names on the memorial, I love it," he added.

His work has always impressed members of the Moonlighter's Exchange Club of Owatonna, who championed the project. "Jim was instrumental in the erection of the memorial," said Annette Duncan of the Exchange



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Jim Hoffmann and his wife, Joan, were honored at last year's Memorial Day program in Owatonna for their commitment to VFW and VFW Auxiliary.

Club. "As an honorary member of the Exchange Club, we are so fortunate to work side by side with Him with his Americanism work. Jim is a hard worker; he always finds a way to make the impossible happen and he does it with a smile."

Duncan added, "He has done so much for Steele County and is such a valued member of our community. Our community is better because of Jim."

But Hoffmann isn't about to take all the credit for the memorial. He said he stepped in to help at the request of the late Mike Pierce. Hoffmann said he made the commitment to Pierce to finish the memorial before Pierce died prior to its completion in 2023. "I think a lot about

Mike," Hoffmann said, adding Pierce had been working on it for 10 years prior to his death.

Hoffmann has been involved with the VFW for 50 years and the American Legion for more than 40 years. He joined the VFW upon completion of serving in the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

Every year Hoffmann helps other VFW members with putting together a special program on Veterans Day. Among the activities are a flag folding program at Owatonna Middle School and delivering care packages to about 80 veterans in care facilities around Steele County. "It's quite a gift for us to be able to do that," he said.

During last year's Memorial Day program, both

"It's satisfying to me and something that every veteran deserves."

Jim Hoffmann
Area Veteran

Hoffmann and his wife, Joan, were honored as Marshals of the Day where they were involved with the placing of the wreath on the makeshift tomb of the unknown soldier. "It was recognition for all the community services we have done over the years," Hoffmann said, noting it was the first time a husband and wife have been recognized together. "It brings tears to your eyes. You feel very accomplished to be recognized."

But perhaps one of the biggest honors to date for

Hoffmann came a couple years ago after he turned over the Color Guard commander duties to Falteysek. "As I walked back to the table, I got a standing ovation. It hit me hard. You don't get standing ovations very often," Hoffmann said.

As for his motivation to volunteer, Hoffmann said he has the time and likes to do it. And it hits him close to the heart.

"With the veterans, it's very meaningful for me. I know what they went through in the service. It's heartwarming."

Retiree remains committed to sports

BY ROY KOENIG

Despite retiring from teaching and coaching over 15 years ago, Sandy Boss still reports to the Owatonna High School gym a couple of times a week for much of the year where she works at the score table for basketball and volleyball.

You can also find her at gymnastics meets at their new home at the old high school, which is incidentally where the program got its start under Boss when she arrived in town in 1969 from the University of Minnesota. She fills in with adapted floor hockey when needed.

She can also be seen at Federated Field in the spring helping with track and field. At Brooktree Golf Course assisting with cross country in the fall. And don't be surprised to see her at the Minnesota State High School League gymnastics meet helping stage teams.

"Because I love it," she confesses. "I love the opportunities the girls have had and where it's going and where it's gone. The changes in the abilities that they have, the skills that they have. It's been fun to watch."

On Boss's free days, she

goes to a gym to work out to stay in shape for biking, hiking, kayaking and playing granny basketball with a team in Faribault. "I try to keep pretty busy. I spent my whole life in a gym, and I still spend a lot of time in a gym," she said.

She participated in intramural sports in high school and college with a little taste of competing against other schools. She was hired as a junior high physical education teacher in Owatonna with the assignment of starting varsity gymnastics at the time of Title IX. "I've always loved to play, and it was a chance for me to continue to play my whole life.

"I felt girls deserved the chance to just not play recreationally, but to compete for a team. This was the opportunity for me to get it going."

She said the girls appreciated the opportunity. "They were more than excited, and they tried everything. They were all multi-sport athletes. They weren't specializing in anything. They were just there to find their niche."

Boss is proud to be recognized as a Marie Berg Education Award recipient. "It's humbling and very exciting to be named. Marie Berg was a woman

who played basketball in her youth, then was still teaching in Grand Meadow when it was time for her to start girls' sports. So, she saw girls' sports from both angles," said Boss.

The honor was presented Feb. 4 at the National Girls and Women in Sports Day, Minnesota celebration at the History Center in St. Paul.

Boss, who is a member of several halls of fame and was an Owatonna Teacher of the Year, also received news recently that she is the Lifetime Achievement Award winner for the Owatonna Business Women.

"It's thrilling. Not just my part in sports but also my part in being a physical education teacher. For all the years that I was coaching, I was also teaching. And I always tried to compartmentalize that. During the day I was teaching physical education and then after school I would do the sports part of it."

All these years after her 2008 retirement, there's no reason for her to step away now, "And so I just continue to do it. Because that's all that I know what to do." Her husband Jeff works alongside her at many of the events.



STAFF PHOTO BY ROY KOENIG

Sandy Boss of Owatonna may be retired, but she's still committed to sports in the community.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Cherry and Gary Schwartz took a short break from one of the many activities they are involved in at Our Savior's Lutheran in Owatonna to pose for a photo.

The Schwartzs devote time to Izaak Walton League

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Owatonna residents Gary and Cherry Schwartz have many interests, but the Izaak Walton League (Ikes) has long been one of their major activities. In fact, they have been involved with the local chapter longer than any of the other current members, according to Chapter President Ted Middlestadt.

Cherry said she grew up between Winona and Homer, Minnesota, with Gary growing up in Gibbon. Remove "Minn." Both came to Owatonna as teachers. Gary taught at Marian for three years and at Owatonna Public Schools for the rest of his career. Cherry said she taught home economics in Plainview before she and Gary married and has lived in Owatonna since 1973. She has taught at St. Marys/Marian for a couple years and English as a Second Language at all the Owatonna Public Schools. She taught migrant education and tutored migrant students for years, she said.

Gary joined the local Ikes in 1975 because of the encouragement of Ken Cruickshank, he said, and Cherry joined later the same year.

In the years since they joined, they have been active in all the chapters programs and served in local, state and national positions. Both have served as president of the local chapter and Gary as state president. Cherry has been state vice president and said she remains the first and only woman to serve as president of the local chapter.

Cherry said her love of the outdoors, camping and fishing were some of her motivations for joining the Izaak Walton League. Gary said the environment was one of his reasons for joining.

Their activities with the Izaak Walton League have also worked well as they raised their two sons, Gavin and Jason, who were able to accompany them on the various activities and trips. In fact, Cherry said, the national convention will be in Bloomington this summer and their son,

Gavin, will be in charge of the Youth Convention. Jason lives in California.

Cherry and Gary have also been asked to do some advisory work for the national convention.

The couple's activities also expand beyond the Izaak Walton League.

Before he retired from teaching, Gary was secretary of the Owatonna Education Association for almost 30 years.

Gary was a member of the Owatonna Jaycees until he "aged out" of that group and Cherry was involved in Jaycee Women and Women of Today.

They are involved in many of the activities at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Owatonna. Cherry is an avid quilter and is involved with the quilting group at the church and is well known as one who likes to visit quilting stores throughout the state.

Cherry was an organizer of the OWLs (Older, Wiser Lutherans) at Our Savior's.

Outdoor activities such as camping and fishing continue to be a major activity after their retirement.



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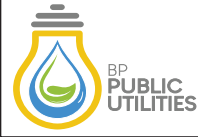
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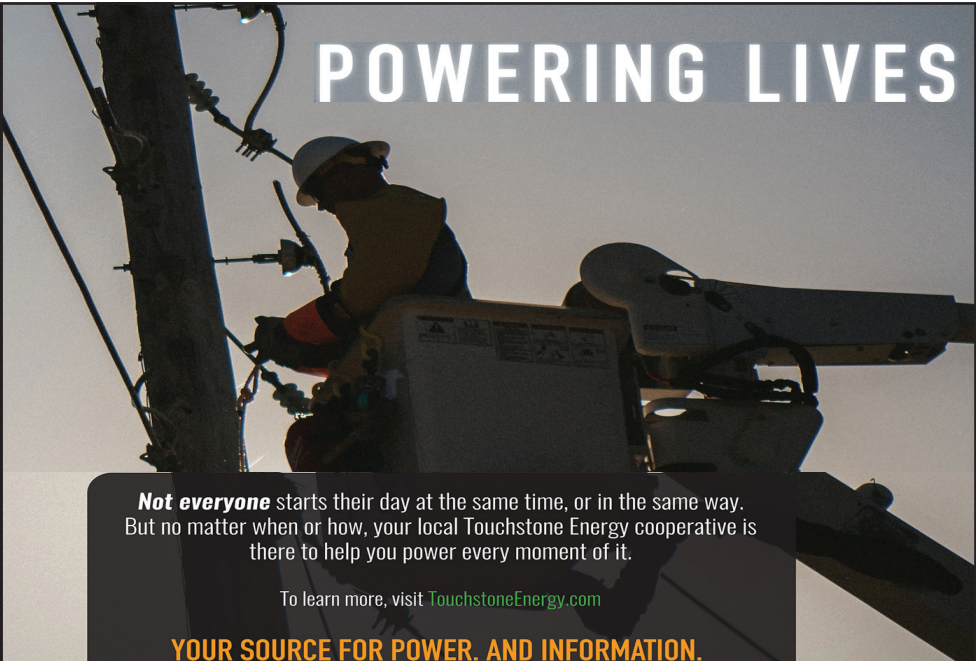
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For Zollner, a heart overflowing with serving

BY RICK BUSSLER

“Which hat do you have on today?”

Gail Zollner has become used to hearing that question from friends and others in recent years as they try to figure out what she's up to in the moment.

The joke used to be while sitting in the audience at her daughters' school concerts people would ask Zollner if she knew how to say no. “Sometimes,” Zollner said, quickly adding, “I'm not very good at it.”

For Zollner, life has become the squeeze play. She often finds herself making room for one more volunteer opportunity. “I think to myself, I'll just squeeze something else in. It keeps my life full, but I like it,” she said, adding she has to carve out time to squeeze in time for friends as well.

Her volunteer load has increased even more in recent years after she retired in 2021 following 35 years at Federated Insurance in Owatonna. She considers herself “semi-retired.” While she currently works part time as a teaching assistant at Trinity Lutheran Church Preschool in Owatonna, she juggles many commitments within the community, all of which are volunteer except for the teaching job.

Asked how much time is devoted to volunteering, Zollner smiled and said,

“The phrase would be more than I should. That's why the Christmas tree is still up.” During the interview in mid-February, Zollner's living room still featured last year's fully decorated Christmas tree.

Much of Zollner's volunteering centers on music and art. She worked in graphic design during her professional career.

Zollner's volunteering includes quilting circles at church, 4-H leader and judging at fairs, teaching sewing classes, assisting with annual program for Owatonna Figure Skating, producing newsletter for Owatonna Arts Center (OAC), singing in the church choir at Trinity, reading at Silent Book Club, promoting dairy with the Steele County American Dairy Association (SCADA) and sharing her love for theatre with Little Theatre of Owatonna (LTO).

That list just scratches the surface for Zollner. There are many opportunities that come up in between those core activities that she lends her serving heart to throughout the year. Many of her volunteer gigs require extensive work behind the scenes.

For example, she produces a newsletter for OAC six times during the year. She also does much of the legwork for the SCADA's various community projects, including the dairy princess program and Breakfast on the Farm.



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Gail Zollner, right, loves to perform in theatre with Little Theatre of Owatonna.

“I think my plate is full and falling off the edge. You need to get me a side platter.”

Gail Zollner

Area Volunteer

Sometimes she finds that her volunteer work for one group overlaps with another group. “It's half friendship, and the other half doing things for others,” Zollner said.

There isn't one organization that rises to the top of Zollner's list. “I don't know that I have a favorite because they each have a unique qual-

ity. They all have aspects of things I like to do,” she said.

She shared how the SCADA Board is always fun for her because “it's like hanging out with my cousins.” Zollner's parents were raised on dairy farms. They moved to the Owatonna area from northern Minnesota when Zollner was 2 years old.

When it comes to LTO, Zollner's hand has touched nearly every aspect of community theatre. She has assisted with staging, costumes, make-up, hair, assembling props and perhaps her favorite aspect, acting. She started with LTO in the performance of “Jesus Christ Super Star” about 12 years ago. Both she and her husband, Mark, performed in the most recent performance of “The Lost Boy.”

Zollner doesn't know exactly how much time she devotes to volunteer work, but a rough guess is about 20 hours per week. “I have a planner,” she said, pointing to how she keeps the various volunteer jobs organized. “I also have different bags for each one, and I compartmentalize the stuff that follows each one of them.”

She describes herself as an extrovert who loves to be around people. “It's all fun and I get to be with people and hang out,” Zollner said of all her volunteering.

Zollner added a spice of humor when asked if there's room for more volunteering. “I think I'm good. I think my plate is full and falling off the edge. You need to get me a side platter,” she said.

For Zollner, volunteerism provides “a warm feeling.” She said she enjoys the feeling of accomplishing something through the volunteering she provides.

“It just feels right. It bolsters one and makes you feel like serving someone else, which is what we are supposed to be doing.”

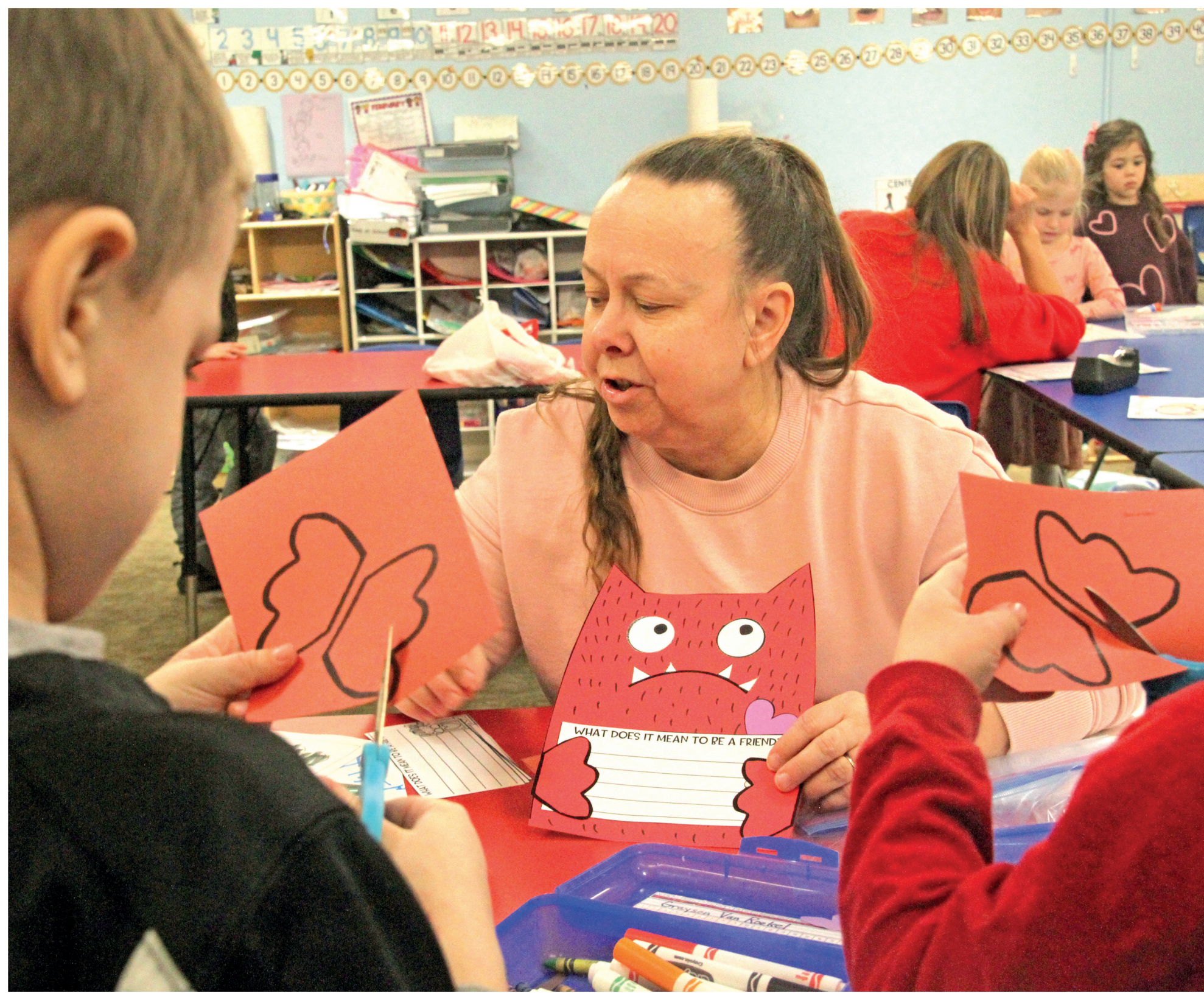
In fact, Zollner said her motivation for volunteering is self-fulfillment. “I want to make somebody feel better and to help somebody else,” she said.

However, she admits there are times she stresses herself out with all her volunteer commitments. “I do cut stuff close, but I like doing it,” Zollner said. “I don't say no as often as I should,” she added.

She encourages others to try their hand at volunteering, pointing out how there are so many places around the community looking for volunteer help. “There are hundreds of things to do in Owatonna, and it doesn't need to be sports,” Zollner said, adding nobody should ever complain of being bored in Owatonna with nothing to do.

Zollner points out that being a volunteer doesn't mean you have to commit as much time as she does. “You can come one day or just one day a month,” she says. “It's a great way to meet people and help somebody,” she added.

“Why do anything? Instead of life being the pursuit of happiness, mine would be life is the pursuit of fun. Anything I do or participate in is because it's fun. Volunteering is fun.”



Gail Zollner of Owatonna keeps herself busy with various groups and organizations within the community, most of them on a volunteer basis.

STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Otto helps where he can, across the area

Ellendale maintenance supe pitches in

BY KAY FATE

For someone who never expected to become a public works director, Josh Otto sure took to the role.

On Ellendale's official city website, he is described as the "maintenance supervisor for the city as well as the licensed water and sewer operator."

Two different phone numbers are listed for Otto – twice, in four short paragraphs.

"Josh is also our animal control officer."

Not listed – but included in his personal resume – are things like "hangs the town's Christmas decorations," "gambling manager for the Ellendale Fire Department," "volunteer fire-fighter," "creator of neat wind-rows after snow events," "repairs park equipment," "replaces water



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Josh Otto, maintenance director for Ellendale and a water operator for multiple surrounding towns, stands next to a fire hydrant that ran for six days after Hollandale's water tower froze, causing water mains around town to burst. It's all iced up because it was super cold.

meters,” “mows straight lines in public areas.”

There’s more. The small southeastern towns of Hollandale, Geneva and Hope, as well as the Thompson Oaks development north of Ellendale, all rely on Otto’s expertise in the end-to-end management of their water utility system.

Involved in that is the maintenance of infrastructure like pipes and pumps, as well as quality monitoring and regulatory compliance.

Otto takes it all seriously.

Case in point: The weekend of Jan. 16-18, Hollandale had what can only be called a water emergency – six water mains broke over the course of several hours.

It was bitterly cold that week, and the town’s water tower froze up, causing immense pressure to the city’s lines.

When Otto got the call, “I took vacation (from his full-time Ellendale job) to go over there to work for them,” he said.

That tracks for a guy who, when asked how he was able to take on so many responsibilities said, “you just ... well, you just find time. I like to be busy, I guess.”

There is a shortage of water and wastewater treatment plant and system operators, Otto said.

All told, his work affects just under 2,000 people between the four towns.

“They need somebody there, and I don’t have a problem doing it,” he said. “I’ve done it for a while, and I know what I’m doing.”

As an Ellendale native, born to two Ellendale area natives, Otto acknowledged the role he plays in the little towns around him.

“It’s just the small-town thing to do, to help,” he said.

Otto grew up on the family’s dairy farm, was a member of the first NRHEG High School class to graduate in the new millennium, then worked for Sequoia Landscape Company for a decade.

“I went to school while I was doing that,” he said, “and I’ve got a four-year degree in law enforcement.”

Though he passed his POST exam and is licensed and eligible to serve as a peace officer, Otto has not used his degree.

About the time he graduated “was the time when there was one opening for every 200 to 250 applicants, and then things started hitting the fan,” he said.

“I didn’t want to go up to the Cities, where you can make really good money being a cop,” Otto said. “I wanted to stay local. It just ... wasn’t worth the stress.”

He was hired by the city in 2013.

The job offers him flexibility and the opportunity to be outdoors.

“I love the seasons,” he said. “There’s some things that kind of wear on you, but I do enjoy getting the full effect of all four seasons.”

Otto already had his Class A license; he earned his Class C water license and Class D wastewater license, which both require working under an already-licensed operator for three years and one year, respectively.

In the 13 years since his hire, he’s been instrumental in updating the city’s four lift stations – doing three of them since he’s been there.

“I think our water treatment plant is the best it’s ever run,” Otto said, because of his dedicated upkeep.

His work hasn’t gone unnoticed elsewhere; other towns have come calling, to see if he will leave Ellendale.

“I did leave Ellendale for three days,” Ottos admits. “I got hired by the city of Owatonna for their wastewater plant” shortly after he took over water and sewer duties in his hometown.

There were mild negotiations to reflect his new licensing, but the city didn’t budge.

Owatonna’s starting pay was significantly higher, Otto said; he

started the week of Thanksgiving.

“I mean, it’s just huge, it’s like walking into a new school,” he said of the plant to the north – but there were no windows. For a guy who loves the outdoors, it was difficult.

Fortunately, the city of Ellendale wanted him back – and was willing to bump his pay to account for the improved care of their systems.

“I never planned on being a maintenance worker,” Ottos said, “but it’s a job that you can look back at and feel accomplished.”

The city has gotten a technology boost, as well, he said, allowing him the ability to check on city operations remotely.

“I can be on the Rainy River fishing walleye in the spring, and I can see, oh, we have 26 feet of water in the tower, and make sure the alarms are good,” he said.

The system also sends emails to city leaders, and tracks much of the information needed to keep the city running.

In addition to that walleye fishing, Otto enjoys hunting, softball “and obviously spending time with family and friends,” he said.

He and wife Kristin have four children, ages 12 and up.

The family lives in the house where his parents, Larry and Emily Otto, lived when they

moved off the farm.

Emily had ALS; Larry was her caregiver. He died unexpectedly on New Year’s Eve 2022; Emily died just five months later.

They were well-known and well-respected in the area; has that influenced Otto’s loyalty to Ellendale?

“In a way,” he said. “I mean, do I miss seeing my dad’s truck at the cafe every morning? Yes,” he said, growing emotional. “It’s just community, you know?”

Otto’s youngest child, Kenley, “got to spend a lot of time with my mom, so that was big,” he said. “I really miss her; but Kenley’s strong like her.”

He sees the support from residents, too.

“You might see me drive through town 10 times a day,” he said, “but it’s for a reason.” Otto begins his day with a check-in at city hall, in case emergencies come in overnight.

Then it’s off to any number of responsibilities that fall to him.

Otto, who said he knows every nook and cranny of the town, appreciates “the people who wave, who want to stand and talk. If I need something, I know who to call; if I need a hand and I’m alone in the (city) shop, I can always count on somebody to be here.”

That goes for the surrounding area, as well.

“Since I’ve started this job, us smaller towns have kind of built a network,” he said, involving Geneva, Glenville, Clarks Grove, New Richland, Hartland and Blooming Prairie.

“Even though I’m a one-man band, I don’t feel alone, because I have so many other resources,” he said.

That goes for emergency situations, too, which typically happen on weekends, in the middle of the night – or, in the case of Hollandale’s water main breaks – in frigid temps.

In that case, Otto borrowed a pressure relief valve from another town and “threw it on a water hydrant to relive the pressure” on the city’s pipes.

“Instantly, guess what? No more water main breaks,” he said.

The pressure relief valve ran for six days as the breaks were repaired and the water tower was thawed out.

“I hate to say it, but it was fun,” he said. “Problem-solving, troubleshooting, is exciting – and educational. And every day is different.”

That’s the best part, Otto said.

“I can’t plan an ice fishing trip or be with family on Christmas Day because I might be plowing snow,” he said. “It doesn’t bother me, though. It’s just part of the job.”

UNTRADITIONAL PATH

Coleman helps students find their way at OHS

BY ALEX MALM

Brian Coleman's path to becoming a career navigator at Owatonna High School isn't a traditional one.

It's fitting for a man whose job is to help students learn about different careers.

Coleman is a native of Michigan who landed a basketball scholarship at the former Huron University in South Dakota.

It was there where he met Linda, the woman from St. Cloud who would become his wife.

After college, she landed a teaching job at Waterville-Elysian-Morristown. They were dating at the time and moved together to Faribault.

Coleman didn't know it, but it would be his first experience with Owatonna, working at Pro Staffing Services in the late 90s.

After a couple of years, Coleman had a choice; stay in southeast Minnesota or move for his job.

"The staffing service was going to close its doors, and they said that I could go to Wisconsin and help them start up one there or I would not have a job," Coleman said. "I said,



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Brian Coleman is a career navigator at Owatonna High School.

'I'm not doing that.' So I went back to school and got my master's."

Equipped with an undergraduate degree in business and an MBA, he accepted a job at his old college as a career counselor and an adjunct professor.

When his father experienced health issues, Coleman flew back to Michigan to help him – amid pressure about who would teach his class in his absence.

"I didn't have time for that," Coleman said. "So I started looking for work."

Small world

As Coleman explains it, the world is big, but "so small at the same time."

Sue Draayer, a former supervisor at Pro Staffing Services, was by then with Workforce Development Inc.

"I reached out to her,

and she said, 'Well, we're hiring career counselors if you want to come five hours and interview.' I said, 'I'll be there,' and I came back and interviewed," Coleman remembers.

Little did he know he would be there for the next 15 years.

Coleman said Draayer allowed him the opportunity to work and learn.

"I was able to work my way up with Workforce Development.... I spent about five years in the career counseling area and then spent the next 10 or so years being the area

manager for Rice, Steele and Freeborn counties... in that line of work.”

Off to school

After a decade at Workforce Development, he found himself back in academia, this time at the Faribault School District, working as a career and equity coordinator.

“I spent about six years there, and I was fortunate enough to get a call and have a conversation about a new position they were starting at Owatonna Public Schools,” Coleman said.

The job was similar to what he was doing at Faribault: helping students figure out what they want to do after high school.

He has been the Owatonna district’s Career Pathways Navigator ever since.

“So...that’s kind of been my journey, landed here, been doing that for the last five years and helping students with their career, in college readiness and life after high school,” Coleman said.

Finding his path

Coleman paused a bit when asked if he ever thought he would find himself working as a career navigator.

“I don’t know if I thought I would go into that or if that was my path, to be honest with you,” he said.

It was while working at his alma mater that the possibility became real.

“I really enjoyed the opportunity that I had to be a career counselor for our university and be able to work with students and try to help guide them to-

ward their path,” Coleman said. “So I think it kind of started there... and then when I was able to work at Workforce Development, I was able to utilize all of those skills to help counsel people and get them on the right track...”

If there were a company layoff, for example, “I would go in and talk to the people and let them know that these services were available for them,” he said.

When they did, “I was able to kind of find out a little bit more about them and see where the cross-over was, what other types of careers there were, and really kind of dig in,” Coleman said.

It’s where he found “just the joy of helping people and being able to find the success and let them live a... self-sustaining life.”

It was something that wasn’t available when he was going to school.

“There was no direction around ‘what’s next for me?’” Coleman said.

“It’s a very unique field. I think the opportunity to have students explore different careers that they don’t even know exist or they haven’t been exposed to” is vital, he said. “We’re only aware of what we’re surrounded by.”

Coleman said the main part of his job is to provide students with that awareness.

“We don’t have the exposure to things that exist outside of our bubble,” Coleman said. “So we have to get outside of that bubble and explore, to be

able to have those experiences – and then you can say, ‘oh, I really like that.’ Or on the other hand, you could say, ‘yeah, that’s not for me.’”

In other words, knowing what they might like is as important as knowing what they would not like.

“Without going and actually starting a job and finding out that you don’t like it... they can actually have those experiences prior to going into that career,” Coleman said.

Coming home

Coleman is involved in the community in several ways, sparked by a sense of being “out of the loop” when he came home from his last job, needing his wife to tell him about things that were happening.

When he got the phone call asking him to come to Owatonna, it was a relatively easy decision; Owatonna has become home to Coleman and his family.

“I had to get reconnected with my community and it’s been a blessing to be able to be in touch, in tune,” Coleman said. “And then it allowed me to join different committees and organizations outside of work to be able to help better our community.”

It includes the Alliance for Greater Equity, United Way of Steele County and as a member of the advisory board for Community Corrections.

His goal now, he said, “is just wanting to help our community be more of a welcoming place for everybody that shows up.”



Helping those with autism is Mary Stanley's passion

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Medford resident Mary Stanley has two children on the autism spectrum. She also is a military veteran who has suffered from PTSD.

As a result, she now has a passion for helping those with similar issues. That passion and what she has learned about autism and neurodiversity has led her to becoming a mental well-being health coach in Medford, starting Supportive Minds, Medford.

Beyond her activities as a health coach, she has also continued to share her knowledge with area residents.

One of her latest projects has been the development of a sensory room at her church, the Congregational United Church of Christ in Medford.

A room at the church has been designed as a place for those children who need a quieter and less stressful environment during services or other activities. All the work to make the room useable, she said, was done by her and church members.

"Kids love the room," she said. "It's good for the little ones to have a



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Medford resident Mary Stanley has become active in helping those on the autism spectrum and also veterans and others with PTSD.

reset." Getting the room ready, she said, required a change to fluorescent lighting, repainting the walls to soft colors and having calming music.

The room can also accommodate youngsters depending on their needs. There are headsets for those with auditory triggers, difference fragrances for those who might be affected by smells. A table has been covered with paper so they can color on it, and a bean bag chair can be calming. Current plans will change one wall to a whiteboard that children can write on, she said.

She said that currently two to three kids are using the rooms on Sunday, but more people have been



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Mary and her family, husband Andrew, David and Arianna.

asking about it since it has become known in the community.

Stanley said she hopes other churches will do similar rooms. She added that it wasn't an expensive project probably costing about \$75 for paint, lights and other supplies.

She also organized a Santa Claus visit to Medford in December.

For that event children were invited come and decorate cookies, see Christmas movies and have a story time. There was also a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Claus. The event

was held at the church and the sensory room was being prepared at that time. As a result, another area in the church was set aside for activities in a quieter environment for those who had neurosensory issues.

Stanley's professional work, she said, has been

recognized by a national organization, Influential Women. She said she just received notification of her recognition last week and as a result of the honor she will be doing some speaking for the organization. She also has a podcast on a variety of issues.

4,500 HOURS AND COUNTING

Jensen is devoted to Hospital Auxiliary

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

It wasn't long after Bernice Jensen retired in 2007 from her position as office manager at Owatonna Ford Chrysler that she was asked if she would consider volunteering with the Owatonna Hospital Auxiliary.

Jensen started working at the gift shop in the old hospital and hasn't stopped since although she did say she has recently cut back on what she does. Over the years, she said, she has put in 4,500 hours volunteering for the organization.

The list of activities has included the Auxiliary Bazaar, hospital front desk, wrapping grab bags for the fair booth, working at the fair booth, working at the gift shop and especially, the Festival of Tables event.

She has served as the membership chair and when they needed a treasurer, "I said sure." She served as treasurer for eight years.

She is also active in the activities of Our Savior's Lutheran in Owatonna and said that over the years "church and Auxiliary took up a lot of time." Among her past activities at the church, she said,

were volunteering as the head "money counter" for counting the offering after services and helping out in the office putting the church newsletter, "The Voice," together for mailing. She said she has stepped back from her money counting duties and the newsletter is now basically sent out by email.

She still works at the hospital gift shop a couple days a month, but her big project is still the Festival of Tables, and she will be hosting a table again this year.

Basically, she said, that involves hosting a table, deciding on a theme for the table, and then getting sponsors for that table.

Tickets are also available for a chance to win one of the many baskets donated for the event.

This year's Festival of Tables will be on May 5 at the Owatonna Country Club. All money raised at the event goes to support scholarships for Steele County residents, employees of the Owatonna Hospital or the immediate family of an Owatonna Hospital employee, majoring in nursing or a health-related field at a college, medical school or vocational school.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Since she began volunteering for the Owatonna Hospital Auxiliary, Bernice Jensen has put in more than 4,500 hours.

Never truly retired

Ellendale’s John & Wendy Schultz step up for community at every opportunity

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Balancing life and work can be a tricky task in today’s world. There’s a fine line of allowing one to overtake the other. That has never been the case for Ellendale’s John and Wendy Schultz. For them, the work is

never finished – even after they’ve “retired.” The two have long been pillars of the NRHEG community through their involvement with NRHEG schools and athletics, and even after all of their children have graduated, the two still find themselves working the jobs they love.

Wendy is a physical education teacher at NRHEG Secondary and John is a bus driver after retiring from his position teaching and coaching in recent years, but that hardly encompasses the scope of their endeavors. The duo also both own and operate both Lerberg’s Car Wash and

Fitness Center in downtown Ellendale while also volunteering in athletics on the side. Despite both having formally retired from coaching, the two still find themselves fully intertwined with their respective NRHEG teams. Wendy’s retirement from coaching was short-

lived and anything but planned. After stepping down as head coach following the 2023 season, she gave the keys to the program to former NRHEG softball alumni Kayley Camerer in 2024. After one season at the helm, Camerer was offered a new job opportunity in

Albert Lea, leaving the Panthers without a coach. When nobody stepped in to take the Panthers’ coaching job, Wendy came out of retirement for the 2025 season to ensure that local athletes could get the chance to play the sport they love. “There wasn’t anyone stepping up to take the



NRHEG softball players, fans and alumni come together to celebrate head coach Wendy’s Schultz’s 300th win during the 2023 season. Schultz retired after the 2024 season to let former alumni Kayley Camerer take over the team, but had to step back into her role as head coach after Camerer left for a job opportunity in Albert Lea.

job, so I just decided that I would do it," said Schultz. "When I wasn't coaching, I would go to the games as a fan right as they would start and then leave afterward and it was a weird feeling. When nobody jumped on the opportunity, I was happy to step back in. We have wonderful kids and parents, so it was an easy decision to step back into the role," said Schultz.

That feeling of missing the sidelines resonated with her husband as well.

John formally retired from his role as head coach of the NRHEG girls basketball team in 2014 after leading the team to consecutive state championships, but he can still be found on the Panthers' bench as a member of head coach Onika Peterson's staff.

"Our community is so amazing. I can think back to the days when John was coaching and just seeing the 13 straight buses full of community members heading to the cities to watch the games. Those memories will stick with me forever... I know he still loves the game, and it makes me happy to be able to see him still be out there doing what he loves," said Wendy Schultz.

Peterson served under Schultz as an assistant coach during the former's tenure, but now it's Schultz that gets to admire the work of his former staff as the Panthers continue to be one of the state's premiere programs.

However, it's not just the local athletes that get to reap the benefits of the duo's hard work.

Wendy has been instrumental in the development



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

John Schultz, standing left, and Onika Peterson, standing right, watch as their team faces off against Hayfield in the Gopher Conference championship in 2023. Schultz retired from his role as NRHEG girls basketball head coach in 2014, giving the role to Peterson, but can still be found on the team's bench happily serving as an assistant to Peterson.

of Ellendale's plans for a new inclusive playground.

The Ellendale Community Action Group has spearheaded the initiative while Schultz has helped through her role at the school and in the community by working on fundraising for the project.

The group has raised \$102,000 for the site and

has purchased all of the equipment for the grounds with just pathways around the playground being the last item on the list.

With yet another big project trending toward completion, Wendy took some time to reflect on her home community.

"We live in such an amazing community where

people are so giving and generous. They want to be helpful, and when they see there's a need for kids that don't have the proper equipment to play with, they find any way they can to contribute. Everyone – the kids, parents and community members – have all come up with their own ways to chip in," said Wendy Schultz.

"We live in such an amazing community where people are so giving and generous."

Wendy Schultz
Ellendale Area Volunteer

Man's experience with homelessness leads Anderson into housing field



Julie Anderson is the executive director of Transitional Housing of Steele County.

BY ALEX MALM

Julie Anderson will never forget the story that made her want to work in housing.

She was the executive director of the United Way of Steele County at the time, and a 59-year-old man who was down on his luck would come to the office every day, looking for help.

"He was living in the park, and he was the same age as my dad at the time and he came in and asked for help trying to find housing, and he did not have much luck," Anderson said.

They were working with him day by day, trying to get him housed. He didn't have the finances at the time.

"It took about six months to get him housed in an apartment, but he was living outdoors at the time, just everywhere he could find shelter," Anderson said.

He was looking for employment, had health issues, needed immediate housing and "there was just no place to put him," Anderson said.

It was then when she realized she wanted to find people a place to stay.

"That's kind of what started my interest in housing," Anderson said.

Now executive director of Transitional Housing of Steele County (THSC), Anderson is able to help navigate many people's housing situations each year.

Early start

Anderson knew from an early age the importance of helping others.

She is the oldest of 10 children, and Anderson said, "My parents adopted seven of those children from around the world with special needs."

They were founders of some orphanages overseas.

"So, when I was growing up, the concept of doing all the good that you can in all the ways that you can was, was really instilled in me," Anderson said. "They were very humanitarian in their focus and very much interested in trying to make the world a better place."

Perhaps naturally, Anderson would go on to work with nonprofits.

She has worked in a number of organizations, but said "the organization that really led me to becoming an activist for people who are experiencing homelessness was the United Way."

She started working at the United Way at the turn of the century, where she served as the executive director.

From 2000 to 2003 she served in the role.

While there, she saw many examples of people who were unhoused.

"We didn't have the resources to help them," Anderson said.

She explained they directed funding toward nonprofit organizations; one of those was Transitional Housing of Steele County.

"It was brand new, just getting started and had seed money, but there were so many people that needed help with immediate shelter, and we had no way to help them," Anderson said.

She didn't know it, but one day, she would be leading the organization.

Off to college

After her time at the United Way, Anderson found herself working at Riverland Community College Foundation.

But after hearing the emotional story of the man battling many barriers, living in a park for months, "my heart kept tugging me to transitional housing, kept tugging me and tugging me and tugging me," she said.

An opening for the executive director position opened.

It was 2009, and people were becoming more accepting of the fact that there was a problem.

Shelters opened, which helped with some of the initial crisis, but there was still the long-term problem, which continues to plague communities today.

"I was impressed by the fact that the community started to rally around the issue of homelessness, but the problem was the homelessness number just kept growing," Anderson said.

The beginning

Anderson said when it comes to homelessness, it is not the "proverbial man under the bridge."

Sometimes, it makes it hard for people to grasp just how big of a problem it is.

"Most of the people who are experiencing homelessness, hide their homelessness," Anderson said. "They are sometimes couch-hopping and they're often living in their cars, so you don't necessarily see it."

Anderson said the local group got its start around 2000 with a group of pastors and concerned citizens coming together to figure out how to address the issues.

The United Way of Steele County, for which she worked for, was the first funder.

"That was the first year that the United Way funded transitional housing, just the seed money that

was needed to start the agency," Anderson said.

A few years later she would be running it.

Different programs

Anderson said THSC essentially has two different programs: transitional housing and eviction prevention.

For transitional housing, they work with the unhoused and get them into an apartment.

The person picks where they want to live, sets up a lease, and then THSC covers the first month rent and damage deposit.

"Then we cover part of their rent for two years every month, according to income," Anderson said.

Anderson said it is an "awesome program, because it really does stop homelessness."

The eviction prevention programs are designed for people who are housed, but need some help.

A common example, she said, is when someone lives in an apartment, their car breaks down and they can't get to work, but they need to get to work to sustain themselves.

"So you put the money into fixing your car and then suddenly you can't make your rent payment," Anderson said.

She said the program is for one-time assistance, they send the check to the landlord, "then the person just moves on with their life and it's all fine."

With transitional housing, however, Anderson said they work with a case manager, weekly, with budgeting and making sure the rent is getting

paid. They even help them with their personal goals and help them become more stable with housing long term.

"You are able to keep making your rent payments because you've been saving, you've been kind of laying the foundation so you can be successful going forward," Anderson said. "It's just a really successful program."

The organization doesn't own any shelters; it works strictly with landlords and getting people into housing.

"We stress that people need to work or go to school to improve themselves while they're in the program," Anderson said.

Increasing homelessness

Anderson said awareness of homelessness has grown over the years, but so has the number of unhoused individuals.

"The problem of homelessness kept growing, because of the economy and because we had challenges with a lot of layoffs and things with a lot of our industrial companies," Anderson said.

The pandemic, she said, brought the issue to the surface.

"People started to see that homelessness was real... it was more visible. It was very difficult to be housed during that time, to get housing if you were homeless," Anderson said.

"And I think people started to realize that this could be a life-or-death issue, that if people aren't safely housed, they could die."



She said one of the biggest issues is that fewer places were willing to rent.

Demand continues to be an issue, in addition to things like rising rents and stagnant salaries.

"The trend has been greater homelessness; absolutely every year it's been trending up," Anderson said. "Rents have been going up and wages remain about the same, not keeping up with inflation."

Like many parts of the country, she said, Steele County has an affordable housing crisis, saying

there isn't enough of it.

It leads to hundreds of people calling THSC every year.

In 2025, the number of calls or personal visits was 598, all of whom were homeless or at risk of being homeless, though some are repeat calls or visits.

Throughout last year, there were 92 households helped through eviction prevention, and 46 households received ongoing transitional housing services.

But the demand is greater than the resources available.

At any given time, there

are about 30 families or households on the transitional housing waiting list in need of services.

The typical wait list can be from six months to a year.

Despite the challenges, Anderson is in it for the long haul. For her it is personal.

"It was a personal, kind of calling," she said.

"I just decided that this is the mission that I want to work on for the rest of my life: housing and housing issues – and the dignity of people, not just addressing their basic needs, but their dignity as well."

Wolfe makes his mark at home

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Sometimes, the best plan is to experience life head-on.

For Owatonna's C.W. Wolfe, that was a literal interpretation, as he reflected on his days playing college rugby at St. Cloud State University.

But when the final whistle blew on his athletic career, there were questions to be answered about what was to come next in life.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do leaving St. Cloud. I kind of just got a degree in rugby," Wolfe said jokingly. "I thought to myself, 'Well, I know I can find a job in Owatonna.'"

So back to Owatonna he came, and soon after re-connecting with his home community, he began working in the school district as a paraprofessional.

His work in the school district also allowed him the opportunity to pursue a lifelong dream: Coaching.

Beginning with middle school football and youth lacrosse, Wolfe eventually worked his way into a role as a varsity assistant coach for Owatonna lacrosse and the head coach for the Huskies' ninth-grade team.

However, there was another team looking for a coach that hit a little closer to home with his work as a paraprofessional.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

C.W. Wolfe, far left, poses for a photo with the Steele County Free Fair landscaping team. Wolfe and Seykora hire high schoolers and college students home for the summer to work as a part of the landscaping team leading into and through the end of the fair.

"I just want to do my part to help make the world a better place."

C.W. Wolfe

Owatonna Area Volunteer

"The adapted floor hockey team needed an assistant coach. I had already been working with kids with special needs, and I have an athletic background, so it all came together perfectly. It worked hand in hand that I understand the kids and sports, so it was a perfect match," said Wolfe.

After eight years as an assistant, Wolfe took over the role as head coach three seasons ago and has watched his program and its talented athletes flourish.

The team has had winning seasons and made appearances at the state meet, but according to Wolfe, nothing beats their annual game at the high school.

"I think of our games at the high school all the time. Our activities director, Marc Achterkirch, has been such an advocate for us to play at least one game a year at the high school... The crowd is packed, the student body all shows up, and it really shows how much our community cares and rallies around one another," said Wolfe.

While he has kept his athletic identity intact through coaching,

Wolfe also realized a dream stemming back to his high school days as a Husky to become a teacher.

After going back to school himself to obtain his teaching credentials, he returned with a new position as second-grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary School.

"It's funny, a couple weeks ago I actually found a paper that I wrote in high school that talked about how I wanted to be a high school teacher, but I just feel like I connect with the elementary kids really well," said Wolfe.

According to him, the job itself is important work preparing students early on for academic success, but another big part is setting a good example at a young age.

"It's just so fun. I don't remember having a male teacher until I was in like sixth grade. I think it's such a need for some of these younger kids that don't have a male role model at that age," said Wolfe.

For those that know him, this is not an isolated example of his character.

Outside of his work as a teacher and coaching at nearly all levels of competi-

tion, Wolfe has long helped provide opportunities to students through one of the community's most beloved attractions: The Steele County Free Fair.

Working alongside Scott Seykora – his good friend and Owatonna's head varsity lacrosse coach – the two make up

part of the fair's landscaping team and annually hire high schoolers and college students that are home for the summer.

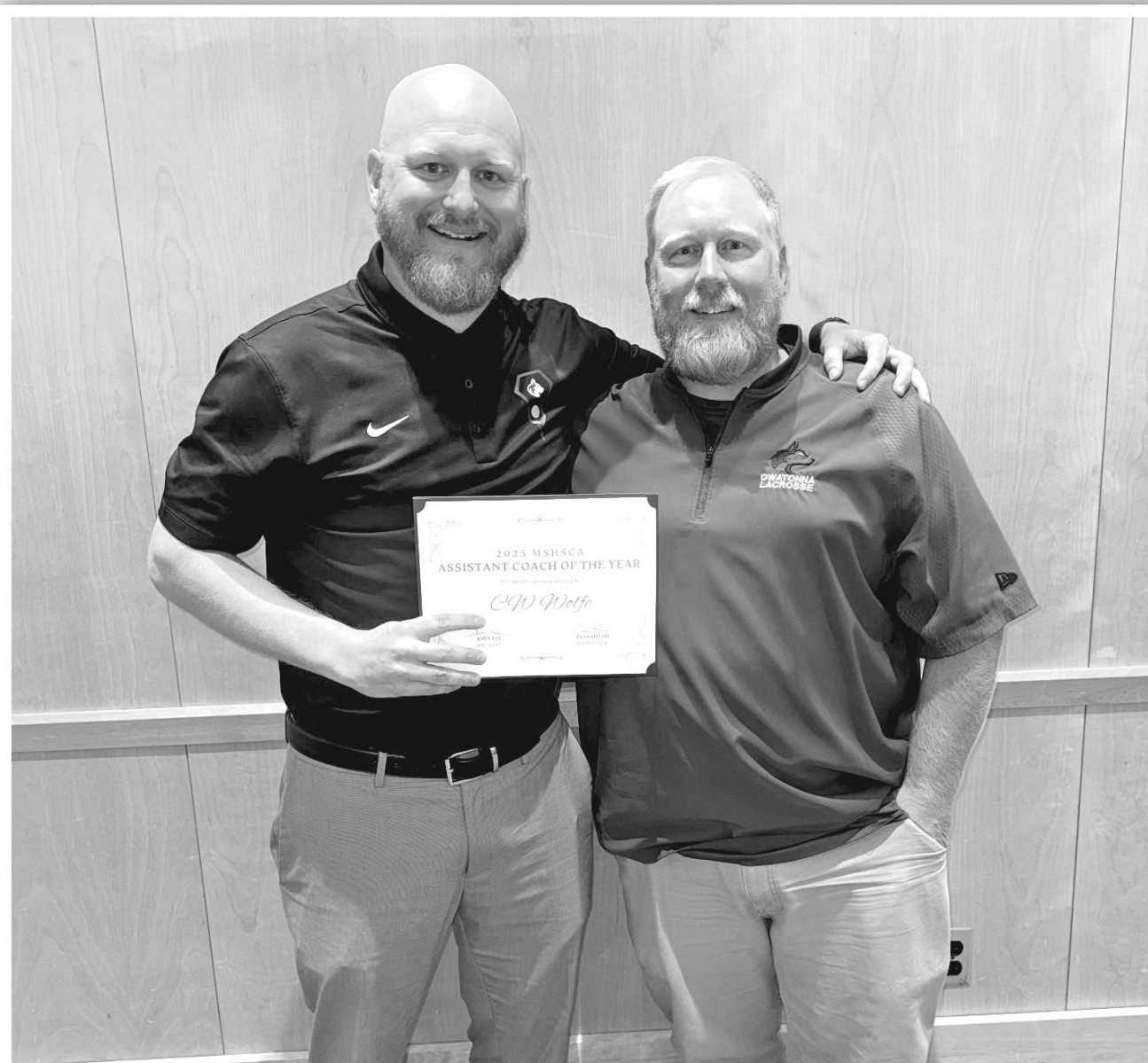
According to Wolfe, the opportunity not only allows them to gain hands-on work experience, but also provides a sense of pride in contributing to

such a beloved part of their community.

Wolfe has seen many seasons of change since returning to his home community after college, but the driving force behind his work and volunteering remain the same.

"I just want to do my part to help make the

world a better place," said Wolfe. "I think so many things we see on social media, you just see so much negativity. I think that at school and in sports, we can help put aside all that negativity and work toward building positive relationships and a stronger community."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Owatonna's C.W. Wolfe, left, smiles for a photo with Owatonna lacrosse head coach Scott Seykora, right, after the former was awarded as the Minnesota State High School Coaches Association's Assistant Coach of the Year. Wolfe has been a coach for Owatonna lacrosse, football and adapted floor hockey during his career working in town.

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TEAMWORK AT PRAIRIE MANOR

Staffing holds key to success at nursing homes

BY HOWARD LESTRUD

It's not easy to please everyone when arranging activities for nursing home residents, said Deb Brown.

She's been the activity director at Prairie Manor in Blooming Prairie since 2022, but spent 20 years before that in different roles at the facility before obtaining the certification through NCCAP, Ridgewater College in Hutchinson.

Brown is the first person to say that managing special activities is a tough job, though they come in many different forms.

Finding an appealing activity for everyone is a real challenge, she said, but Bingo still reigns as the No. 1 choice in most nursing homes.

Brown added the Happy Hour Cart to the entertainment on Thursdays when she took the role as director, "but they may have had (their own) Happy Hour occasionally," she said.

Some canine friends come to visit every Tuesday; a Bible study has been

added, and it's popular with the residents.

There are many other options for residents, including Pam Doerhoefer doing nails each Monday.

Don't expect to see Brown just watching, though – she might be seen dancing with the residents.

Working with folks in nursing homes may be genetic: Two of Brown's children are also on the staff at Prairie Manor.

Spiritual, physical, emotional, cognitive and musical needs are also important for nursing home residents, Brown said.

Overall wellness is most important to everyone at the facility, she said.

Care and Wellness staff are on duty 24 hours a day; a nurse is scheduled in the building and on call 24/7; there are monthly vital sign checks of blood pressure, pulse, temperature, respirations, weight and oxygen saturation.

There is a Resident and Family Council to handle questions and concerns.

"We are really blessed with the team of individuals we have," Brown said.

Her work as activities



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Deb Brown assists with a singer at Prairie Manor Care Center in Blooming Prairie.

director has its challenges, "but all in all, it's a fun job and it's a work in progress."

Prairie Manor has residents who live loving and fulfilling lives, Brown said.

"We are person-centered," she points out. "We will bring activities to our residents."

There are seven other professionals on the activities staff, all tasked with taking care of the residents' needs: Angeli-que Brasseur, Makenna Brown, Veronica Brown, Aric Christoferson, Pam Doerhoefer, Shaun Hanson and Hannah Kinney.

"We are person-centered. We will bring activities to our residents."

Deb Brown

Prairie Manor Activities Director



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