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INTRODUCTION

Offering a newcomer's perspective ...

I love this time of year and I'm not just talking about summer. I'm talking about that time of year when we take a nostalgic look at where we've been and a hopeful gaze forward to where we're going. Who We Are is the perfect name for this publication.

Having spent the majority of my life in another community, I've realized that it takes an outside perspective to realize how great "here" is. More than a few think "over there" is way better than "here."

Having been at the News-Banner for only eight months, I'm uniquely qualified to tell you that "here" is pretty spectacular.

I've told this story a few times since I've been here, but it's worth repeating one more time. Before I started at the News-Banner, I was told that Wells County was



Doug Brown
President
and Publisher

a closed-off community, that I'd never fit in. I'd always be an outsider and it would take years before I lost the "new guy" label.

Wrong. The people I've met have been wonderful and welcoming. I've also been told to stop referring to myself as the new guy.

As a community, we are progressive and primed for growth. We are a warm community, open to new ideas. We are an inclusive community, one that allows a newbie like me the chance to contribute. We are a community that embraces older generations as well as millennials. We are a community that has strong faith and we wear it proudly.

We are great. That is who we are.

The News-Banner is excited to share these stories about the people and the organizations that help shape our community. We are lucky to have them.

I hope you enjoy the 2017 Who We Are edition as much as the staff of the News-Banner has enjoyed putting it together for you. ♦

... and now, from a guy who's been here awhile

It'll soon be nine years since I wandered into my new place of employment, shook hands with my new co-workers, and settled in at the News-Banner.

Doug had a story he wanted to repeat, so I'll repeat one, too. It was the opening night of the 2008 Street Fair, two months after I started here, and I walked down the midway, shooting photos and talking with people. I was amazed at how few people I knew outside of officialdom. I struck up conversations with random strangers, just to get to know somebody, anybody.

Nine years later, I find my five-minute bike ride from my home on Bluffton's south side almost always takes a little longer than it should. Somebody sees me



Dave Schultz
Editor

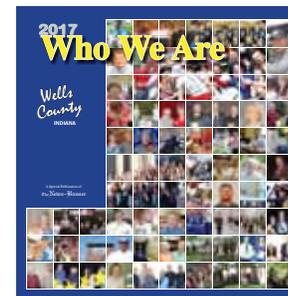
and wants to talk. Sometimes it's just "Hi! How are you?" and sometimes it's a substantive discussion of the week's events. It is about getting to know people.

Every year, we have a little pow-wow when we share ideas about what we want to write about. We discuss the approaches and try to ensure we are getting a good scope of what's been happening throughout the county. I have a friend, Carol Frauhiger, with ALS and she trusted me to tell her story. Mark Miller talked with Derek Myers of Neoti as the company turned 10 years old. Glen Werling wrote about Southern Wells student Alexis Eckelbarger, a remarkable girl who seems to be winning the fight of her life (quite literally). Jessica Bricker shines a light on a program that give foster kids something of their own. Matthew LeBlanc profiles outgoing Southern Wells Elementary School Principal John Purcell. And there's more.

Who We Are, indeed. Good stuff. Enjoy. ♦

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WHO WE ARE BY THE NUMBERS

27,949

Population of Wells County

11,734

Housing Units

\$55,987

Median Household Income (ranking 19th among the state's 92 counties, putting Wells County well above the state average)

\$37,823

Per capita Income (ranking 48th)

\$115,200

Median Value,
Owner-Occupied Homes

\$501

Median rent, monthly

90.7%

Adults with H.S. education (11th)

17.6%

with B.A. degree or higher (49th)

4,876

School enrollment

Population of
Incorporated Communities
in Wells County:

Bluffton9,997

Ossian.....3,353

Markle1,088
(453 in Wells County)

Zanesville.....605
(475 in Wells County)

Uniondale310

Poneto.....167

Vera Cruz.....80

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Friends of the fire tower

The Friends of the Ouabache State Park launched a fundraising effort to save the landmark, and raked in \$75,000 in nine quick months to get the job done



The Friends of Ouabache State Park pose in front of the fire tower in May before one of the group's meetings. The group is credited with successfully completing a fundraising campaign to restore the tower. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

Historical icon at state park is saved

By JESSICA BRICKER

What started with a plea last summer ended with a celebration this spring after the Friends of Ouabache State Park raised \$75,000 to restore the park's fire tower.

The effort was expected to take at least five years, but the group shattered those expectations in nine months.

The tower was closed to the public in April 2015.

"Ouabache State Park has lost one of its pieces of history," a flier distributed last year read. "Due to safety concerns, the park officials have closed the access to the tower. We need to open the tower and restore it to its original splendor."

Fundraising material distributed by the Friends of Ouabache State Park asked the public to remember "that first climb up the tower," "the thrill of making it to the top," "holding your breath as you stared straight up all those stairs as your child participated in a rite of passage."

Ginger Murphy, one of the three deputy directors for Indiana State Parks, agrees.

"It's a rite of passage, on our properties that have fire towers, for kids and families and school kids to be able to climb those fire towers," she said at the FOOSP's annual meeting in April, when the checks were presented to mark the end of the fundraising campaign.

The effort was led by Kathy Schwartz and Jeanne Ploetz. Schwartz said the committee was formed last August and they began brainstorming ideas for fundraising. Last year's Bluffton Free Street Fair marked the official kick off and various events and fundraising opportunities were held over the fall, winter and spring.

Then the group was approved for a \$25,000 matching grant from the Wells County Foundation. They had a deadline to beat in raising the full matching funds, and did so with 13 days to spare.

It was the passion of Schwartz and Ploetz, Park Manager Dustin Clark said in April, that drove the project forward.

"It was a group effort," Schwartz said in a press release. "Ideas became reality only through the efforts of many."

All park visitors, Clark said, had a story to share with him of generations walking up and down the tower.

"The very first thing I heard (here)

(Continued on Page 4)



Norwell High School industrial arts teacher Bret Landrum, left, works with student Cole Gray to install new paneling inside the press box at the school's football stadium. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)

Schools refocus on job-based learning

By MATTHEW LeBLANC

It is early on a cool April morning at Norwell High School. The sun has just risen, and Bret Landrum's students are ascending the stairs at the school's football stadium.

Landrum is the school's industrial technologies teacher, and his students are about to begin work inside the stadium's aging press box. There, they will work to replace paneling marked with holes and scratches from decades of use.

"Hey," Landrum bellows to students who have lifted a new panel into a space on the wall. "Is that all the way up? It looks like there's a gap."

The error is quickly fixed, as about a dozen Norwell students move through the tight space to further renovate the press box.

It is work similar to that of projects undertaken by Landrum's classes each semester at Norwell, but it's also indicative of a renaissance of sorts in hands-on, manual labor in schools in Wells County. While learning still involves classroom instruction, area educators — and businesses — are also paying attention to career and technical education offerings

that can provide useful skills for students and employers.

"I've had lots of business owners in the construction and manufacturing industries tell me they are screaming for industrial workers," said Landrum, who started work at Norwell 16 years ago.

That's true, according to educators and business leaders, and schools and industries are working on ways to ensure students learn about careers that might not require four-year degrees. They are also working to give students the know-how to compete for jobs in areas such as welding and manufacturing.

At Bluffton High School, a welding program provides a pathway for students at that school and others to earn certification in welding. Southern Wells High School next year will restart a dormant construction program in which students will build homes in Wells County.

The Adams-Wells Manufacturing Alliance — a group of area businesses that works to help promote manufacturing careers in the high schools — works to get students working in those businesses to give them real-life work experience.

(Continued on Page 60)

Historical icon saved

(Continued from Page 3)

was, 'Why's the fire tower closed? When are we opening it again?' And from that point forward, all we heard was how important this thing was," he said.

The push was made to the Department of Natural Resources, and the state recognized the project's importance and allowed him to direct the Friends group. Preliminary estimates indicated it could take at least five years to get the project going.

The restoration will put Ouabache back on the map, he said, and is great for not only the community and surrounding area but for the state and its history. Also, because of the group's efforts, the children of the people who shared stories will now have stories to share themselves.

Dating back to important and practical uses — from spotting potential Japanese planes during World War II to serving as look-out points for wildfires — now they are great places to make memories, Murphy said.

There are only six towers left in the state park system, she said, and their history is an important part of the state's history.

"This fire tower was part of a network of towers that once protected Indiana,"

reads a board at the base of the fire tower. "In 1930, Indiana began constructing a series of fire towers with the goal of having no visibility gap. By 1952, Indiana had 33 towers, most of them in the southern half of the state."

It adds: "Many Indiana lookouts were local farmers, recruited when the fire danger was high. Sometimes a wife or other family member would serve as lookout. Lookout duties included: watching for smoke, locating and reporting suspicious smoke plumes, taking weather readings, communicating with fire crews during a fire, recording fires, keeping the area around the tower mowed and keeping the outhouse clean."

Requirements for the lookout job: Passing a vision test and the ability to climb the tower "several times."

The educational board also indicates many of the lookouts during World War II were women.

Planes replaced fire towers as a way to locate fires by the 1970s, the board reports. Now, local residents call in fires.

As the sign near the tower puts it: "This fire tower stands as a sentinel, reminding us of the time when Indiana was protected by a series of towers staffed by dedicated lookouts." ♦



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Shown late last year at Trusted Supply Chain Partners with the Regional Advisory Board of Community Anti-Drug Coalitions agency of the year award are, from left to right, Brian Steffen, Lane Gerber, Amanda Nusbaumer, Molly Hoag of Wells County Citizens Against Drug Abuse, Trent Gerber, and Lyle Isch. (Photo by Glen Werling)

Helping out their employees is in the business philosophy

By JESSICA BRICKER

Getting recognized at the regional level late last year for the company's efforts to combat substance abuse in the workplace was a surprise to General Manager Lane Gerber and the staff at Trusted Supply Chain Partners.

It's part of their standard operation, after all, so they don't think much about the execution.

"We don't have a formal mentoring program, but we continue to work through issues with our employees," Gerber said in May. "We have an open door policy that we encourage our employees to come and talk with us about issues and things in their personal life that are causing problems. This allows them to let us know what is going on and they will not have any repercussions based upon our conversations with them."

Gerber's parents began the business in 1991. He's here to continue what they've ingrained in the company, and the focus is bigger than them.

"God is a big part of it," Gerber said.

They recognize that their employees have personal issues to deal with, and the company's philosophy is to give them more than a fair chance to succeed.

"Our goal at Trusted is to offer a fair chance for anyone to succeed both personally and professionally," Gerber said.

Taking that extra step to help their staff creates productive and loyal employees, he said.

"They're the people who make our company work," he added.

Gerber said their employees' pasts are their pasts; the company's leaders can help them change their future. He wants them to have the same opportunity to succeed that he's had, he said.

If the employees are willing to talk, their employer is willing to help them through situations, such as scheduling work around programming the employees might be enrolled in.

If their lives are going well outside the company, Gerber said, it goes well inside.

"We're here to help people, when it really comes down to it," he said, and that in turn allows them to have a successful business.

Trusted Supply was recognized in November 2016 as Wells County's nominee for the agency that has made an impact on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in the community. During the annual meeting of the Regional Advisory Board of Community Anti-Drug Coalitions in Fort Wayne, they captured the top award.

"Poor attendance and drug use was creating low productivity and high turnover at

(Continued on Page 9)

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40 years ago ...

... a few students became the spark for a School of Ballet

By **BARBARA BARBIERI**

"Whatever the Weather" was the title of the 40th anniversary spring program as the Creative Arts School of Ballet celebrated its 40th anniversary and honored its founder, Beth Lampton on May 7.

What began as a small school, offering only a couple of classes a week to a few students, has grown to a school that today has over 80 students that range in age from 4 years of age through adults — both male and female.

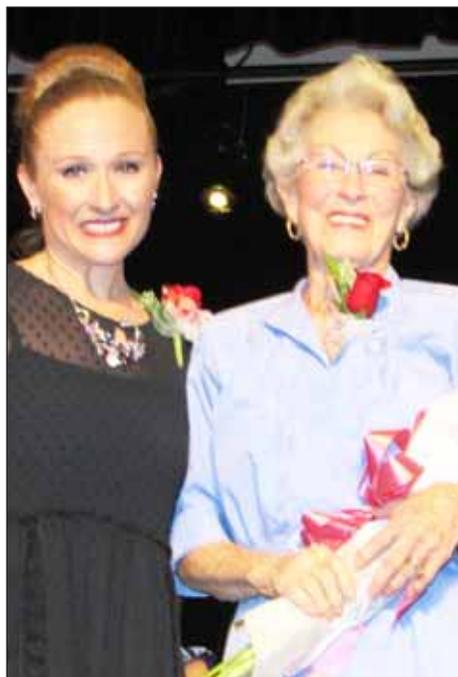
A curriculum that began with only classical ballet technique has expanded to include point, modern and creative movement in conjunction with the original classical ballet curriculum.

From 1976 to 2014, Lampton served as the director of the School of Ballet. She holds a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Sullins College in Bristol, Va., and studied with dance notables such as George Balanchine, Agnes DeMille, Mia Slavenska and Ruth Page.

Her professional credits include dancing in the Broadway production "Are You With It?" and the Warner Brothers film "My Wild Irish Rose." In 2002 she received the Esther Collins Lifetime Achievement Award in Arts Education presented by Fort Wayne Arts United and in 2013 she was presented the first Bette A. Erxleben Wells County Volunteer of the Year Award.

When the School of Ballet began in 1976, Lampton had no intention to have an end-of-year performance. Until 1994 parents were able to see their child's progress by attending classroom demonstrations that included a choreographed piece at the end of the year.

Beginning in 1994, the studio presentation transitioned into the first spring performance held at Bluffton's First Presbyterian Church. Costumes were simple, consisting of white net skirts worn over the dancers' basic black leotards. In 1996 all students took part in the performance and in 1997 the first full-length program "Imagination" took place. Since that time the School of Ballet has offered a performance each spring with original choreog-



Creative Arts School of Ballet director Jeni Meeks, at left, presented a bouquet of flowers to Beth Lampton who 40 years ago began teaching ballet classes in Bluffton. The 40th anniversary celebration for the School of Ballet, which began with a few students being taught in Lampton's basement, has grown to over 80 students and five teachers. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri)

raphy, costumes and staging.

And from one instructor (Lampton) the teaching staff has grown to five including Jeni Meeks, who also has served as director of the school; Pamela Stilwell Talarico, who also serves as artistic director; Hannah Fisher; Emily Roop and Janiece Lipsey, who will take over being director for the next class year.

For the 40th anniversary program, two complete ballets were presented with "Les Patineurs" and "Rainy Day," written and choreographed by Roop.

Outreach by the school has included creating floats for the Bluffton Free Street Fair and offering dance lessons at the Wells Community Boys and Girls Club.

A new year — the 41st — of instruction will begin in the fall. ♦

... The Bargain Hut began a very giving tradition

By **JESSICA BRICKER**

Through the donations of others, the Wells Community Health Services Foundation Auxiliary has been able to donate \$1.5 million back into the community during its 40 years of existence.

The auxiliary, chartered as the Wells Community Hospital Auxiliary in November 1976 and meeting for the first time the following January, uses funds raised through sales at the Bargain Hut — located 120 W. Spring St. in Bluffton — to fund health and safety requests around the county.

Member Shari Wolf said the auxiliary donates to nine different organizations each year, including Family LifeCare of Berne, Cancer Services of Northeast Indiana, BrickHouse Family Ministries, The Closet and the Bluffton Police Department.

They also fund scholarship and disaster relief requests, as well as requests from Wells County EMS, including the recent purchase of trauma go-packs for classrooms in the county. They've also purchased AED (automated external defibrillator) units for the Bluffton Parks Department and the Wells County Sheriff's Department.

The auxiliary is 100 percent volunteer based.

"We appreciate," added Wolf, "any hours anybody can volunteer."

It takes about 12,000 hours a year to operate the Bargain Hut, longtime member Arlene Smith said.

Smith, one of the auxiliary's original members, tracks the volunteers' hours. She said she was approached to be a member of the group and was told her help was needed.

"Reluctantly I said, 'Well, OK,' and I did," she recalled at the May meeting of the auxiliary.

She retired from her work at a local bank in 1990 and started at that point of "constantly" being a volunteer at the Bargain Hut.

"I've held every office there is to hold," she recalled. "Sometimes more than once."

She said it was a happy time for her.

"I felt at home at the Bargain Hut," Smith said.

She will be 92 in August. She worked until she was 89.

"I miss it. I miss the people. I miss the volunteers. I miss the people who come in to shop," she said. "I miss the work, believe it or not."

Nancy Colen was the group's first president, and there were 20 charter members.

"The objective of the Wells Community Hospital Auxiliary was to render assistance to the hospital and promote goodwill in Wells County," according to a written history of the group. "The main objective of the auxiliary at that time was to manage the Information Desk."

The Bargain Hut opened Sept. 4, 1981. "Our customers come from surrounding communities as well as Fort Wayne, Portland, and Ohio," Margaret Crandall, another original volunteer, said in a recent interview.

Crandall said Paul Bender, former administrator of Wells Community Hospital, was the one who suggested the organization of a thrift shop.

"He thought it could benefit the community while raising money for health-related needs in the community," she said.

At the time, Crandall agreed to help the two dozen or so volunteers who banded together as Wells Community Health Services Foundation Auxiliary.

Three years after the Bargain Hut was opened, the auxiliary took over the Lifeline emergency communication system. When the group was told in 2011 that the system would be monitored out of Massachusetts as of 2013, they found a way to manage it here so that emergency calls go through local dispatchers.

When the hospital sold in 2000, the auxiliary became the Wells Community Health Services Foundation.

Crandall recalled in May a Lifeline memory.

A woman had called to report her Lifeline was beeping and annoying her. She wanted someone to come turn it off.



Margaret Crandall is one of the volunteers who has helped run the Bargain Hut, which raises funds so that the Wells Community Health Services Foundation Auxiliary has been able to make \$1.5 million in donations over the past 40 years. (Photo by Kayleen Reusser)

So Crandall went and discovered it was the woman's fire alarm. The gas burner was left on, activating the alarm.

Crandall felt good about responding and the service they provided.

"Even at three in the morning, I did," she said.

Tracy Fiscus recalled the June 2015 attempted murder of one of the Lifeline's customers. The woman's button saved her life, Fiscus said.

Others, when asked about memories during the past four decades, list off the items the group's been able to purchase with the money, such as imaging cameras and "jaws of life" equipment for firefighters.

But the items first started with televisions, phones and furniture for the Wells Community Hospital. They also purchased surgical equipment.

"We've done a lot and given a lot," Crandall said.

In 40 years, they've donated about \$1.5 million, and it all starts with people donating gently used items to the Bargain Hut and

Looking back, Crandall is surprised at the Bargain Hut's longevity.

"I never dreamed the small charity shop a group of us helped to found 40 years ago would still exist today," she said. "It was just something to help the hospital."

The Bargain Hut is open 9 a.m. to 4



Arlene Smith was one of the first volunteers of the Wells Community Health Services Foundation Auxiliary, which is celebrating 40 years in 2017. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

p.m. Wednesday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Saturday. ♦

— Additional reporting by Kayleen Reusser

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Can we talk?

Local group gives Vietnam veterans the opportunity to share more than just war stories

By GLEN WERLING

For most people reading this story, the Vietnam War is a distant memory — perhaps from their childhood — of graphic images on TV and in newspaper.

For some, its history was possibly touched on briefly in high school or college. Still for others, it may even be a mystery. They've heard of it, but they know little or nothing about it.

But to a combat veteran it can be as close as a dropped tray of silverware in a restaurant. As close as the days surrounding the Fourth of July. As close as the backs of their eyelids.

In a desert of people who, through no fault of their own, can't understand, there's an oasis available to people who do understand through experience. It's the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 698.

The local chapter meets twice a year in the back dining room of the Corner Depot Restaurant.

"We have 10 board meetings a year, but we only have two what I would call all-hands meetings," said president Ben Jones.

The dining room was packed on a warm mid-April Monday evening. Some of the attendees were wearing hats indicating their service.

Chicken, baked steak, mashed potatoes and gravy and green beans were passed around in generously proportioned bowls as the vets peppered their conversation about grandchildren and current events with talk about the war.

The guest speaker, retired Gunnery Sgt. Don Counts, USMC, from Evansville, recounted his war service, illustrating it with a host of articles brought back from a country halfway around the world.

Those who never heard a shot fired in anger, never even set foot in Vietnam but served during that period, are also welcome at this table.

Jones' father was in the Marine Corps during World War II. His older brother was in the Navy and had great stories to tell. Jones joined in June 1965, blissfully unaware of the events that were just getting a good start that would forever



Gunnery Sgt. Don Counts, United States Marine Corps (retired), from Evansville, addresses the April meeting of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 698 at The Corner Depot. The group meets twice each year. (Photos by Glen Werling)

change America.

Jones joined the Navy. He asked to be on a destroyer out of Norfolk, Va. "They asked me if I objected going to Vietnam, and I said no," Jones said.

That's not where he went.

He was a gunners mate on a landing ship, tank (LST), in the Mediterranean. He was onboard from 1966 to 1968. "We were part of a NATO force for awhile," said Jones.

"You had no choice. You went where the military told you to go," he said. "We've never discriminated against anyone who didn't serve in combat. For every one man on the front line shooting his gun, there were nine guys supplying him with ammunition, food and uniforms — all the things he needed to stay on the front line."

There are 50 members in the local chapter. Most are from Wells County. There are several members from Fort Wayne who came down here after the chapter in Fort Wayne closed.

Anyone who was not in the military during the Vietnam War era may also join as an associate, Jones explained. One prominent associate is Claude McMillen, a Korean War veteran.

The chapter was started by Ralph Garcia in early 1993. Garcia and Jones set

up a small display in the Merchants Tent at the Bluffton Free Street Fair that year. "That's how we got a lot of our guys. Ralph also told me to keep my eyes and ears opened for anyone with Vietnam military service," said Jones.

Garcia served as president for awhile and then wanted to step down into the secretary's position. Jones took over as president and was reelected on that warm April evening.

"We're going to miss Ralph," said Jones. Garcia died in 2016. "He was the driving force behind this organization. We want to keep it going in honor of his memory."

In addition to providing a place for the veterans to meet with other veterans, the organization does service work. Over chicken and baked steak, Jones was looking for volunteers to help with trash clean-up downtown May 13.

The Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, the organization took donations for veterans. "We have several veterans who are not homeless, but who are not well off," said Jones. There's one member who lives a distance to the east who can't afford to attend the twice-yearly meetings. The organization pays his way to come and pays for his meal.

"All the money we collect goes toward benefiting veterans," Jones said.

However, one of its greatest benefits is providing a place for veterans to just talk.

"We're able to talk with each other when we're not able to talk with some-

one else," said second vice president and chaplain Jerry Blevins. "One thing I like about them is they're there for you. You can talk to each other about your experience in 'Nam and they understand. They don't look at you weird if you get tears in your eyes."

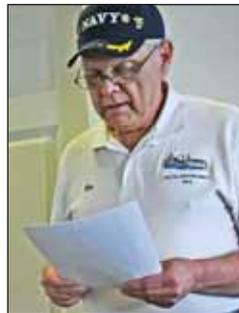
He was in the Army from 1969 to 1971. His last 10 months were spent north of Quan Tri.

"It's an honor to serve these guys," Blevins said. "You look at these guys, they're maybe 65 or 70, but mentally they're 18 or 19 and some of them haven't learned how to come home yet."

For years, member Bob Frantz said he wouldn't talk about the war. He didn't think anyone cared. But then he realized there were others out there who needed to talk.

"I thought about those who were hurt or who have emotional problems, if I could help out in anyway, I would," Frantz said.

"It's good to open up and talk about it," said Jones. "We give them a place where they can." ♦



Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 698 President Ben Jones leads the Empty Table ceremony at the start of April's meeting. The ceremony honors those killed, missing in action, or prisoners of war in all wars.



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Helping out their employees —

(Continued from Page 5)

Trusted Supply Chain,” read the industry’s nomination in part. “As the trend continued, management was led to help change the direction of the vicious circle of drug use and to provide the user with hope and opportunity. They do this by engaging with each of their employees.

“They strive to provide not only education and resources; but also to mentor these individuals personally and professionally in order to support them throughout the process. Many are given multiple chances in order to develop each employee as a productive member of the workforce and of society.”

Wells County Citizens Against Drug Abuse leaders presented Gerber and his team the award in December.

“CADA would like to thank Trusted Supply Chain for going above and beyond to make Wells County a better place to live and work,” said Molly Hoag, then-president of CADA, at the time the award was presented. “Your company is setting an example by recognizing individuals in need of second chances through employment that helps them establish credibility as a productive employee and a better citizen.”

Nominations for the top award were received by seven counties in the 13-county region. A spokesperson said the nominations were judged by people outside of northeast Indiana who have extensive knowledge of the Governor’s Commission for a Drug-Free Indiana.

Trusted Manufacturing in Ossian is a contract metal manufacturer that creates the metal parts or framework for health-care and institutional furniture. It also has a division that creates floor to ceiling movable modular office walls in vinyl, wood or glass panels. The company has, on average, 45 to 55 employees. ♦



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Take a tour



New building provides more space, visibility for Family Centered Services

By TANYA ISCH CAYLOR

Executive Director Amy George is exaggerating when she says that Family Center Services' new building on North Main Street in Bluffton has twice as much space as the agency's former downtown location, but not by much.

The nonprofit that now houses a dozen social services programs went from 7,000 square feet in its former home at the corner of Washington and Marion streets to well over 11,000 when it made the move to 1515 Sutton Circle in November.

The new building, the former home of Youth for Christ, isn't just roomier. With wide hallways and no stairs, it's much easier for clients with mobility issues to

navigate. If George can zip from room to room on her hoverboard, as she did while giving a tour of the facility in early May, there's no reason someone with a walker or wheelchair couldn't do the same.

"This is the kind of room we really needed," George says, showing off the facility's large meeting room. Before the move, if FCS was planning a meeting or event, "we would have to go somewhere off site to do it, usually a church or the library."

The new meeting room includes a smart board and a kitchen with bar-style seating on one end. A row of high chairs are available if needed, along with a supply of toys.

"Having a room like this has been a huge benefit," George says, noting that the Mentoring Moms program now has kitchen space to prepare a meal. FCS has made the space available to other local nonprofits as well.

George says the program that's benefited the most from the move is The Closet. Baby clothes, diapers and other supplies for needy parents of small children were crammed into a much smaller space in the old building.

Now there are two separate rooms full of tidy clothing racks, one for summer and one for winter, with an outer area of neatly arranged toys, books and baby food.

"We've also got a washer and dryer now, which we didn't have before," she said.

Moving through halls brightened with murals by Nancy Wagner, George shows off a long hallway of offices, a boardroom and a staff lounge, which also gets used by some of the youth programs.

There's a classroom that provides a safe, supportive environment for students suspended from school, a visitation room for parent-child conferences, and a resource room full of totes and supplies for caseworkers.

Stepping inside a large storage room, George laughs when she recalls how quickly the space filled up after the move. She hadn't realized how many supplies were being stored in attics and staff members' homes.

"This whole section here is just stuff for the duck race," she says.

There are still projects in process around the building: light fixtures to be replaced, ceiling tiles to be fixed. George hopes to lay some patio stones out back so staff can eat lunch outside on nice days.

Still, the building looks and feels fully operational.

"Just being on State Road 1 is huge," she says, noting that the number of volun-



Amy George, executive director of Family Centered Services, has been known to travel the new building's spacious halls via hoverboard. Here she pauses next to one of the many murals painted by Nancy Wagner, this one depicting one of George's dogs, Mocha. (Photos by Tanya Isch Caylor)

teers has increased as more people notice the site. "The visibility alone is more valuable than any marketing we could have done."

It's hard to believe that the plan for acquiring the building, along with the capital campaign to raise \$500,000, didn't even exist at this time last year.

"We basically decided in July that we were going to do this," she said. It helped that the agency is buying the building with a three-year contract, so that pledges for donations could be spread out over time.

George had faith that the project would ultimately be successful, but was stunned by how quickly everything came together.

"It's just incredible to me that the community stepped up like that," she said. ♦



The Closet, a program that provides clothing and supplies to needy parents of small children, has separate rooms for summer and winter clothing in Family Centered Services' new building.



The meeting room is used by many of the agency's 12 programs and sometimes by other local nonprofits as well. Before the move, meetings and events had to be held off site, at a church or the library.



The visitation room at Family Centered Services provides a comfortable place for parents to meet with their children.



This classroom provides a safe, structured environment for local teens who have been suspended from school.

Up from the ashes

A potentially devastating fire didn't slow down Ossian Smoked Meats

By GLEN WERLING

Everyone has a bad day once in a while. Sept. 20, 2016, was a truly awful day for Ossian Smoked Meats President Peter Sorg.

A fire raced through the company's two smokehouses.

"We're not 100 percent certain how the fire got started," Sorg said. "We think it was started in an exhaust or flue pipe coming up out of the smoker into the smoke house."

The fire apparently burned through the pipe on the side that wasn't visible and ignited the wall.

Firefighters were able to prevent the fire from spreading beyond the smoke houses. Sorg had nothing but praise for firefighters from Ossian, Bluffton, Uniondale, Preble and Southwest Allen County, whose expertise saved the rest of the building from going up with the smokehouses.

"They just did a tremendous job of getting the fire out. It was a very hot fire. I was thankful that no one was seriously injured. We managed to get everyone out OK," said Sorg.

But the smoke houses were beyond reclamation and had to be demolished.

"It completely halted our business for a few days," recalled Sorg. "We had to find companies that smoked product with natural smoke like we do. We wanted to continue to keep our customers happy."

Ossian Smoked Meats customers want that natural smoke flavor, said Sorg. The meat could be prepped for smoking, but Ossian Smoked Meats ended up sending meat to Owensboro, Ky., Evansville, Chicago, and a town in Iowa.

"It was very costly," said Sorg. But it was a cost Sorg was willing to absorb to retain his customer base.

"We didn't get a lot of feedback from our customers that they were seeing a noticeable difference," said Sorg. "We could see a difference, but it probably was not noticeable to someone who didn't eat it all of the time."

However, looming just a little more than 40 days away was the traditional holiday ham buying season. It's a season where successful sales could be the differ-



Ossian Smoked Meats Corp. President Peter Sorg was amazed at how fast new smoke houses were built to replace two that had burned. (Photo by Glen Werring)

ence between finishing the year in the black, or the red. Sorg knew that he had to get new smoke houses up and running.

"The fourth quarter is the part of the year that makes or breaks our years a lot of times," said Sorg.

Getting the smoke houses built would not have been possible without the cooperation of a number of people who understood Sorg's predicament. Chief among them was Sorg's insurance agent, Tom Neuenschwander, who expedited Ossian Smoked Meats' claim.

Recovery, Sorg observed, was a very fast process. "I had a friend who was an

architect who came out right away and he immediately started the drawings for the new smokehouses. I had a friend in the equipment business who suggested a smokehouse company. We contacted them and that gentleman was here the next day."

Once the claim cleared, new smokehouses were ordered within a week of the fire, Sorg said.

The smokehouses were built in North Carolina. The shell of the oven came in one piece. The controls, the fans and smoke generators were shipped separately and built on site.

After the fire, Sorg was told by those in the smokehouse business that he would probably be smoking meats onsite again by the first part of February the following year.

That was not an option. He told them that Ossian Smoked Meats would be smoking its own meat by the first part of November.

"I think the only people who believed me were me and Tom," said Sorg.

But they were the ones who were right. "We were able to produce hams for Thanksgiving and we were able to produce all of our Christmas hams here," said Sorg.

They actually ended up selling more hams during Christmas holiday ham season 2016 than they had in 2015. "The

demand was greater and we were able to meet the demand on time," Sorg said.

The new smokehouses are more efficient and more consistent, he added, observing that they produce a tremendous product.

"We still smoke the same way with hardwood, but now we use hickory chips instead of hardwood dust, but it's a natural product, nothing artificial," Sorg said.

He is pleased that the fire did not cost his business a single customer. On the contrary, with the construction of the new smokehouses, Ossian Smoked Meats has gained business.

Looking back on it, he's still amazed at how fast the restoration project went.

"The people involved with the construction understood the importance of getting us up and running again," said Sorg. "Everyone had such a sense of accomplishment when we fired off the first smoke house in November. Our employees were happy, the construction people were happy and our customers were happy." ♦



Bluffton firefighters use the aerial truck to combat a fire at Ossian Packing Sept. 20, 2016. (News-Banner file photo)

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Who We Are

Carol and Keith Frauhiger deal with her ALS timeline



The Frauhigers enjoy a moment in the yard swing in the backyard of their Highland Court home.

By DAVE SCHULTZ

There's a battle being fought in a house on Bluffton's southeast side. It's almost certainly a losing battle, but it's one that is being fought with bravery, general good humor, and no small amount of faith.

By the time you read this, Carol Frauhiger will be 15 months into her diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the neurological disorder usually referred to by its initials (ALS) or associated with the name of its most famous victim, New York Yankees slugger Lou Gehrig. It's a most cruel ailment, causing muscles to shrink and eventually be unusable.

She has the rarer type of the disease, as it has affected her throat and mouth much more than her arms and legs. She can no longer eat in the conventional sense; instead, it's become an exercise in taking nutrition. The same thing applies to her speech; her husband Keith can usually understand her, but she carries an electronic notebook to communicate with the people around her.

They're a husband and wife duo, united in the goal of helping Carol enjoy life

to the fullest. There are trips to take and people to see and experiences to enjoy while she still can. The couple's 45th anniversary is coming up in September, and they're planning to have quite the shindig for friends and family.

There may not be a 50th.

— — —
A conversation with Keith and Carol Frauhiger is an interesting experience. Keith is a big and friendly man who loves a good conversation. Carol loves the social aspects of life, being with friends and family. She is, however, unable to speak. When she goes out to dinner with friends, her friends talk and eat; she writes on her electronic note pad and doesn't eat.

When they sat for an interview a few weeks ago, Carol tapped out responses to questions on her computer, the font on the screen set as large as it can go. Keith sat on a couch, occasionally translating his wife's remarks when she can't wait to type them out.

In early 2016, Carol had a raspy throat. A visit to an ear, nose, and throat specialist found a nodule on her vocal cords. She

had to rest her voice for three weeks. As a precursor of what was to come, she was given a white board to write her thoughts on in lieu of speaking.

Dr. Amy Lai suggested she go for more tests and she was moved on to speech therapy. The tests were exhaustive and included a test on how well she swallowed.

"She would look at my tongue and for some reason she knew something was different," Carol said. "She couldn't tell me what she was looking for but told me I needed to go see the neurologist."

It was Dr. Jose Panszi, a neurologist at Bluffton Regional Medical Center, who ran some tests and gave her a preliminary diagnosis: ALS. She was referred to Dr. John C. Kincaid, a neurologist at the IU Medical Center in Indianapolis, and that's where things really got interesting.

"They put needles in my body and we watched it on the screen and the lines would go up and down like a heart monitor," she said.

The diagnosis was confirmed. She's on an unofficial clock that started in March

of 2016 and could run out sometime this year. Maybe.

"They told us 18 to 24 months," Keith said, weighing in while his wife continues with the narrative. "Eighteen months would be September."

— — —

When the Frauhigers first started going to the ALS clinic in Indianapolis, something they do every three months, Carol worried about what she would see.

"I had a fear I would be crying a lot, just because of seeing people there that I eventually would look like — in wheelchairs and so forth — but that was not the case," she said. "I go to a room and all of the therapists come to my room. There are many teams of people who come in."

In one of their early visits, they had an encounter with a young man on the clinic staff that absolutely made their day — and maybe their lifetimes.

"When I mentioned something about church, he asked me where I went to church and I told him," Carol said. "Before he left, he asked if he could say a prayer for me. I said 'Sure!' He prayed a



Carol Frauhofer types at her computer keyboard to communicate. She is 15 months into a diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as ALS.

(Photos by Dave Schultz)

very nice prayer.”

A few minutes later, the chaplain of the ALS clinic stopped by and said something about the young man taking her job away from her. “She prayed for us also,” Carol said. “They are all very good to us.”

— — —
The journey thus far has been doable. Carol can still drive, but she doesn’t want to walk too far at a time. She gains nutrition through a tube, which bypasses her swallowing problem.

“When somebody asks me to go out for lunch, I am ready to go, even though I usually sit and watch them eat while I sip on water or pop,” she said. “I don’t want to sit here and not be around people.”

Still, it’s hard not to participate. “Friends will say, ‘You want this?’ or ‘You want that?’ and I usually say ‘no,’” she said. “I might nibble a little, but not

much at all.”

There have been vacations and trips, efforts that have been undertaken under the compressed time frame that has become Carol’s life. Keith praises the airlines and the destinations for making it possible for his wife to get the most out of her trips, accommodating her nutritional and mobility needs. Without their help, she’d be stuck at home all the time. Home is good, but not when it becomes a prison cell.

— — —
When the discussion turns toward the future, about living with what might take her life, Carol and Keith — usually upbeat people, even in the midst of such difficulty — turn somber. She will miss her grandchildren growing up. (Keith notes their grandchildren are calling them by the German nicknames of “oma” and

“opa,” something that could establish Carol’s presence in memory in the years ahead.) She expects that May 14 was her last Mother’s Day. “It is hard to think of all the years that will take place after I die and all that will happen in those years,” she said.

She’s lost about 70 or 80 pounds since her diagnosis. There are wrinkles all over her body, she will tell you (but not show you).

“I tell people, ‘Don’t pray to lose weight,’” she said. “I used to pray to lose weight, but I would say not through a tragedy.”

And there’s the constant reminders of what is likely ahead. The Frauhoegers are Christians, and their faith would ordinarily be considered unshakable. And so it is, until it isn’t.

“I know people want to make me feel better when talking about death, because they will say that no one knows when our time is up,” Carol said. “But when they give me a timeline, it is harder to deal with. Some people have lived years with ALS, and they will say that attitude makes a difference. I try to think only God knows when my time is up, and I have lots of questions to him. Sometimes I wonder, ‘Is he really there?’ and I think about what heaven is like.” ♦

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End of a career

Retiring Southern Wells principal John Purcell at first wanted to be an architect, and he also worked as a state trooper. It was in education, however, where he made his mark.

By **MATTHEW LeBLANC**

For a guy who once thought he'd be an architect, John Purcell has had quite a run as an educator.

When classes ended for the year at Southern Wells Elementary School in late May, Purcell — the school's principal — had logged more than 30 years in education. He's been a teacher and an administrator in seven schools from North Vermillion to Southern Wells since the early 1980s.

He retired this month, capping an educational career — albeit one with a brief interlude as a state trooper — that he describes as fulfilling and rewarding.

"Thirty-four years," Purcell said, reflecting in his office at the elementary school in April. "It's been a good 34 years."

Purcell grew up in Rising Sun — the largest town (population about 2,000) in the smallest Indiana county (Ohio County), he says. He lived in that little town on the banks of the Ohio River with his mom, Jean, who was a homemaker, and his dad, Harry, who worked for United Telephone until they moved to Warsaw at age 12.

A few short years later, it was time to go to college and Purcell had his sights set firmly on a degree in architecture. But it's funny how things work out sometimes.

In the spring of his freshman year at Ball State University in Muncie, his interests turned to education.

"All the way through school, I was going to be an architect," Purcell said. "Something tripped my trigger — I'm not sure what it was. I decided to teach."

It's a decision that's been a lasting one.

Right out of Ball State, Purcell began work as an elementary school teacher at North Vermillion Community Schools in Cayuga. Then, in 1984, he moved to Roanoke Elementary School as a teacher.

He would go on to earn a master's degree in school administration and supervision from Indiana University in 1988.

His work in school administration would begin about five years later, when he took a job as assistant principal at Churubusco Elementary School. Purcell took over the top job at the school —

"almost overnight," he said — when its principal was killed in a car accident in the mid-'90s.

He has remained in administrative positions at elementary schools since then, save for a stint from 1995 to 1998 as director of special services at Smith-Green Community Schools — a position he describes as "assistant to the superintendent." Purcell served as principal at Lancaster Elementary School in Huntington County before arriving at Southern Wells in 2012.

Purcell worked as a trooper for the Indiana State Police briefly, after teaching at North Vermillion. He quickly returned to teaching, however, because he said he missed the work.

Working with elementary school children seems to come naturally to Purcell, who easily interacts and jokes with his students. He is often away from his office, talking with teachers and students throughout the school.

During an event in April inside the Southern Wells Elementary School gym, Purcell competed alongside students — he wore a tie and ran in dress shoes; children wore tennis shoes and jeans — in games to celebrate Healthy Kids Day.

Those are the moments he said he'll take with him into retirement, the "light moments."

Purcell's work with students has been noticed.

"Mr. Purcell cares about the social, emotional, and academic success of all students," said Steve Darnell, Southern Wells Community Schools superintendent. "His passion for learning is contagious. As a building principal, he has supported and encouraged parents to be engaged with the school and their child's teacher. He has built solid relationships with parents as educational partners for students. His work at Southern Wells Elementary School will be missed."

Purcell said he has enjoyed his time as an educator, but he notes things have changed in the years since he first stepped into a classroom. Families have changed, he said, social mores have changed.

The teaching profession itself has



Southern Wells Elementary School Principal John Purcell retired this year, after more than 30 years as an educator. Cari Whicker will take over as principal at the school. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)

changed, he said, citing increased time spent testing students.

"Those were good times, back when you could teach," he said, referring to his earlier teaching days. "We had standardized testing, but only once a year. The rest of the time, we just taught."

"We had a lot of time to teach, and they (students) had a lot of time to learn."

Still, Purcell is quick to laud teachers for their dedication to students and their shared profession. Teachers, particularly at small schools like Southern Wells, he said, are able and willing to work with students on an individual level, trying to make them successful.

"There's a lot of preparation to doing different things for different kids," he said. "All kids have gifts. All kids have talents."

All kids have struggles. To do our job right in education, it's much more difficult than it looks."

Purcell and his wife, Tina, live in Warren, the town they've called home for nearly 20 years.

So what's next for the once-aspiring architect who ultimately made a name for himself?

"I don't know what I'm going to do next," Purcell said, smiling.

He knows he wants to continue working, probably in something related to education. For now, though, he'll take a break and look back and appreciate his time as an educator.

"I've been fortunate we've had good families (at Southern Wells), good kids," Purcell said. ♦

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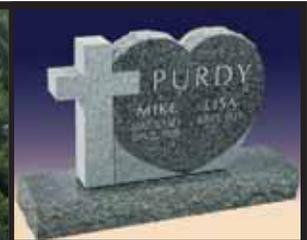
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Out of Africa

Ossian couple takes a dream born in Mozambique and makes it a reality

By GLEN WERLING

Ossian is a long way from Mozambique in southeast Africa.

But both posed a challenge for Jeff and Heidi Reed. It was out of Africa that the couple first formed their idea for a unique coffee house in Ossian.

Although the Reeds couldn't possibly have seen it, the idea for Crimson House Café started when their oldest daughter, Liza, checked out what it would be like to be a missionary for Iris Global in Mozambique in 2009.

Heidi Reed and Liza went to Mozambique and loved it, Heidi said. Liza was asked to return in 2010, but this time Jeff took her.

Iris had just purchased a farm and wanted Jeff to use his farming expertise to bring it up to production. Jeff figured he would be a behind-the-scenes manager, but he said God had a different vision for him after his second visit to Mozambique.

"The Lord just wrecked me for the people," said Jeff.

He left his job behind as a field production manager for Weaver Popcorn in Van Buren and Heidi left her stylist salon business behind and they took their two younger children with them to Mozambique where Jeff used his farming and farm production management expertise to minister to the natives.

They also left most modern conveniences behind to live on the farm with their children about three miles from the nearest village. Where they lived was nicknamed the bush-bush, because it's considered even more remote than the bush. "Our nearest neighbor was actually the largest male prison in the entire province," said Heidi.

"They (the natives) knew we were committed to them and committed to the project," Jeff said.

They grew white corn, vegetables and Moringa trees.

The corn was planted with a donated tractor and planter. The natives were so grateful that they no longer had to plant by hand, recalled Heidi, and government officials were impressed that for once the rows were actually straight.

The produce of the farm supported a center for orphan children and widows. The natives used the corn the Reeds grew to make a form of mush. The corn they produced in two years provided 78,000 meals to widows and orphans in the area, Heidi said.

The Moringa trees are native to subtropical climates. "Someone sent us a bag of seeds from India before we left," said Heidi.

The leaves of the Moringa are highly nutritious and the seeds can be used to purify drinking water.

The Moringa would eventually play a major role at Crimson House.

At the end of 2014, the Reeds decided it was time to turn over management of the farm to another missionary

and come home to Ossian.

"We really feel like the Lord called us back for family. We have grandkids now and it's really important for us to be a huge part of their lives," said Jeff. Both Jeff and Heidi were close to their grandparents and they want to form that same special kind of bond. "We just felt the timing for us was just such that it was really time to be back in Indiana," said Jeff.

"When we were in Africa, there was not a lot of great restaurants there, but one of them was in an old house that had been turned into a coffee house and café. We would go there and think it would be so great to open something like this back home. So we started talking about it," said Heidi.

But when they returned to Ossian, they also returned to the work force — Jeff as a consultant for Weaver and Heidi working with special-needs students at Norwell Middle School.

"The idea of a café was just a dream," said Jeff. "We really never even considered it because financially it just sounded too big. We'd just discuss it every now and then."

Then one day they were talking to their children and asked each one of them what their dream was.

The children then asked their parents what their dream was. Heidi said, "My comment to them was, 'Just to see your dreams fulfilled.' Then they said, 'What if your dream has nothing to do with us, what is it then?' It was the first time I realized I stopped dreaming. Well, if we could dream, I thought about how my grandma used to own a café in Zanesville and that's where my mom and dad met. Then I thought about the dream we experienced in Africa. It was then that we started looking around and seeing if it would be possible."

It took a lot to make the dream a reality — two years as a matter of fact. But with a lot of help from friends and family, a small white house at 304 N. Jefferson St. has been converted into a café.

The Reeds actually bought two houses side by side — part of a group of rental houses that all were put up for sale at one time. They picked the east side of the road intentionally because Jeff discovered a traffic study performed by the Indiana Department of Transportation showed that most morning traffic — think coffee buyers — is northbound through Ossian. An east side location makes it easy in, easy out.

They decided to make a drive-through after learning that former customers of the now-closed Brew Ha coffee shop in Ossian wanted a drive-through.

The plans were to make the one-story house into their



Jeff and Heidi Reed opened the Crimson House Café in Ossian in March. (Photos by Glen Werling)

home and the two-story house into the café. The Mozambique café had been in a two-story house.

But Indiana is far different than Mozambique and the Reeds ran into a wall of regulations that made converting the two-story house into a restaurant economically untenable. So, they flipped their plans and the two story became their home while the single story became the Crimson House.

The Reeds got a real schooling on government regulations.

"You get this vision, this dream you want to see fulfilled. Then you realize there's a reason why some small businesses never get a start. There's regulations from the state, the county, everybody's going to have a say in what you're going to do," said Jeff.

They were really thrown for a loop by, of all things, stormwater drainage for their parking lot. They had to buy property they hadn't anticipated to build a detention pond.

"That was never part of the dream," Heidi said laughing, "But we had to remind each other that this dream is not based on how we're feeling in the moment."

"A little delay caused by drainage, it's nothing, really," said Jeff. "Whatever obstacle is in front of you seems huge, but you can overcome it. Just see God's hand in it."

"We could have walked away from it many times and people would have understood it. But that's not who we are," said Heidi.

They got their friends and relatives excited about the dream, too. Their help has been immeasurable, the Reeds observed. The head chef, Jamee Thiele, is Heidi's cousin. The barista is the Reeds' son-in-law Chris Lee — who was also instrumental in locating the coffee Crimson

House would brew. Emily Easley serves as the pastry chef.

Heidi painted the white vinyl siding house red because the Reeds wanted the house to stand out. "There's not a lot of red houses," said Heidi.

The color of the house also helped inspire the name of the café.

When they were trying to come up with names, whenever they would settle on one, they would discover there were other businesses close by that already had the name they wanted.

One morning Jeff woke up, looked at a crimson wall they had in their old house and he said to Heidi, "What do you think about Crimson House for the name of our café?"

They kept the feeling and the look of the old house. "We definitely wanted more of a homey feel," said Jeff. "We wanted a place where you feel at peace and ease. Whether you're having a sandwich or visiting a friend, we wanted that setting which says, 'Relax.'"

The Reeds stressed they buy their produce locally and everything is prepared in house.

The Reeds still have a heart for Africa. Hence, for every Moringa tea sold at Crimson House, a Moringa tree is planted in Mozambique.

Right now they're still testing the waters to see what the local community will support. "We want to grow slowly and try to do it well," said Jeff.

Their current hours are based on that testing. Crimson House Café is open from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, Friday from 6 a.m., to 9 p.m. and Saturday from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. The short Saturday hours are so that the side rooms can be rented for small functions such as birthday parties, meetings or baby and wedding showers. The meeting rooms are also available for rent during the week.

Since opening March 31, what they are doing is apparently working.

"We are beyond pleased with the response from the community.

"We've been so blessed," said Heidi. ♦



The Reeds decorated the interior of Crimson House to keep a homey atmosphere.



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They're new and they're in charge

Nate Rumschlag, Wells County's engineer; Josh Cotton, recently named the highway supervisor; and Matt Favory, Wells County's new EMA director, say their jobs are going well

By JESSICA BRICKER

There are three new department leaders in Wells County government.

The most veteran of the trio, County Engineer Nate Rumschlag, recently completed his first year on the job. The other two — Emergency Management Agency Director Matt Favory and Highway Supervisor Josh Cotton — started in 2017.

All three offer fresh eyes, looking at the job from new points of view.

Favory is a former Army military police officer. He earned his emergency management degree in 2013.

After suffering a combat injury to his back, he said the military wanted him to have a spinal fusion surgery to continue to be able to serve. He declined.

Favory has friends in Wells County who told him the EMA director job was opening, so he sent his resume here. Then he came here himself.

"I kind of just started showing up here," he said. "I'd take leave from Missouri and show up here on like a Tuesday and just kind of walk around until I saw somebody and say, 'Hi, I'd like to work here.' It kind of just worked out that way."

Favory is working on building relationships with everyone in various departments across the county. He knows in the event disaster strikes, he can't do the work himself.

He's been making appearances around the county, introducing himself. He asks what the EMA can do for people, and in turn tells them what EMA needs from the people — all in an effort to work together in keeping the citizens safe.

So far it's going great, he said, and people are quick to help.

The county wrapped up a \$14,000 grant to make the conference room in the lower level of the Wells Carnegie Government Annex the county's emergency operations center, where they will start to run exercises and drills out of to make sure all the key players are up to speed on things like where to sit, what to bring and what to do, Favory said.

Cotton has experience managing vehicle maintenance. He was told by a friend about the job and after thinking it over

— he wasn't looking for a new job — he decided to put in his resume.

He, too, says it's great so far. The commissioners and staff are great to work with, he said. He has staff that range from first joining in 1978 to only being on the job for a couple of years. It's a variety of people with experience across the department.

He's completed a detailed evaluation of the fleet and assets the county has, prioritizing them for replacements. In a recent meeting of the commissioners, he presented his replacement plan for the foreseeable future. It's been a fun process, he said, because it's allowed him to get familiar with the equipment.

"My favorite saying is, 'I've been thrown on a moving bus,'" Cotton said.

Everything still had to operate following the retirement of longtime supervisor Ed Herman, and people were coming to work still needing jobs, Cotton said. It's been challenging but he's had good resources and people who have helped along the way.

Every week it's something new, from learning the processes for bids to patching and from chip-and-sealing to striping — and then, eventually, snow removal. There's a schedule to follow for each season.

"So I dive in deep," Cotton said, "and find out what I can about each of those situations."

Rumschlag is the former city engineer for Decatur, where he was primarily in charge of the stormwater department and worked on erosion control, stormwater management and site development.

Within his first six months on the job, he had secured more than \$740,000 in grant funding and guided the Wells County Commissioners through a somewhat tumultuous conclusion to a federal aid bridge replacement on 300W over the Wabash River south of Ind. 116.

Rumschlag said he loves his job and loves coming to work.

He also says he feels Favory and Cotton both have the energy to put their own stamp on their new positions.

"They're both growing things. I think collectively, I suppose we can all agree,



From left, Nate Rumschlag, Josh Cotton and Matt Favory are new county department leaders. Of the three, Rumschlag has been on the job the longest, recently hitting his first year mark. Cotton leads the highway department and Favory leads the Emergency Management Agency. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

we are trying to elevate the perception of our positions and the quality of what we do and being able to defend what Wells County has to offer," Rumschlag said. "We get to be part of the planning, the implementation and then the management of reaction to (situations)."

All three of them get to do that in their various jobs, Rumschlag said.

Looking to the future, Favory said he wants to emphasize education and training so that he and his deputy are on the same page. Things are constantly changing; the grant process has already changed since he joined this spring.

He also wants the EMA office to have more of a visible presence in Wells County.

"I'm working to make the office relevant within the county," he said.

There are plans to set up a booth at the Bluffton Free Street Fair, handing out pamphlets and similar items to the community. They've also partnered with the Red Cross, who will give citizens all the

smoke detectors they can take if they need or want them.

He is also working on building his volunteer base, and festivals serve as a "catalyst" for him to get out and be more visible, he said.

Rumschlag has established a road conversion petition process, which will allow the county to establish a routine for years going forward. Everyone, he said, likes routine.

There are other things he'd like to work on, such as updating the roadway safety audit and other cogs in the county process.

Meanwhile, Cotton said there are 720 miles of county roads to maintain and benchmarks to hit. He's checking the process of how those things have been done to determine how they should be done in the future. He doesn't want to overlook the basics.

"You just can't stop and reset," he said, "You just got to keep moving." ♦



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Jeff Kemper is 'dangerously optimistic'

By GLEN WERLING

When Jeff Kemper was in his 20s, he had no idea that one day he would own a flooring store in Ossian.

He was a Richmond native, a 1983 graduate of Richmond High School. He then spent four years in the Army after high school.

"I jumped around for quite a bit after that. I did home remodeling for awhile. I worked in a factory, for awhile I worked in a hospital as a unit clerk — that's basically the lady at the front desk. I was the first male unit clerk Reid Hospital ever had," said Kemper.

But life has a funny way of throwing curve balls and it threw one to Kemper. It left him looking for a change, something new. He was between jobs and decided to come up to Ossian to live with his sister for awhile.

It was more than awhile. He stayed.

"I started laying flooring and never left," said Kemper.

He started working for his brother-in-law at Clark & Mitchell. He was there for about six months and then he went to Contract Interiors. He worked there "in one capacity or another," he said, from 1991 until 2001.



Jeff Kemper took a chance on moving to Ossian — a chance that has paid off for the Richmond native. (Photo by Glen Werling)

When he started working flooring it was just a job. Then he discovered it was something he was good at. He started out as a helper, then moved to an installer then to the lead installer's position. Then he went to the scheduling desk.

After that, when Main Street Flooring owner Larry Hanson decided to sell, Kemper saw an opportunity to become

partial owner of the business, which was co-owned by Contract Interiors.

In 2007, he bought out his partners and changed the name of the business to Kemper Flooring. He moved it from downtown Ossian to the Ossian Furniture location. Six months ago, he moved it to the former Dollar General location on Ossian's south side, to give the business better visibility.

"This move has increased my traffic flow a huge amount," Kemper said.

He's had his chances to leave Ossian. His skills have drawn attention from national flooring entities which wanted him to work for them.

"But I can pull enough work from around here and southwest Fort Wayne to make a decent living," he added.

He's been termed "dangerously optimistic" by one of his associates.

"I just wanted to stay here. I like the small town atmosphere. We've got good schools and I like the people around here.

Yet we still have quick access to Fort Wayne where I can do just about anything I want to," said Kemper.

Keeping his employees in mind drives him to be successful. "There's no option to fail. I have too many people with families who depend on me being successful."

One way he shows his appreciation toward the town that's adopted him is by seeking the vacant seat on the Ossian Town Council. Kemper was appointed last year to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of Bill Miller.

"I'm a firm believer that if you don't vote or you don't volunteer you have no reason to complain about anything," Kemper said. "If you don't at least try — and that's not to say you'll succeed — but if you don't try, you don't have any room to complain."

He believes town council is one of the most underrated elected positions to hold.

"I was overwhelmed by the scope of what you have to know and by the decisions you have to make for the community based on very little input. There's such a broad scope of what you have to know," he said.

"The council members put their heart

(Continued on Page 37)



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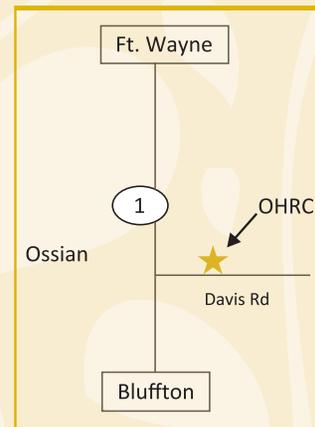
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Shooting for perfection

By TANYA ISCH CAYLOR

Twenty years into his skeet-shooting career, Bruce Christian suddenly started missing.

The shots looked good when he squeezed the trigger on his shotgun.

But his shooting got worse.

“My scores went in the toilet,” Christian says. “It was a year of pure frustration trying to work through it. First you’re trying to figure out what’s going on. Then you’re trying to figure out how to fix it.”

Finally he realized his left eye was interfering with his dominant shooting eye, “trying to take over,” as he puts it. Taping the left lens of his safety glasses eventually solved the problem.

Two years later, the 60-year-old Zanesville man is the reigning world champion 28-gauge skeet shooter, the first ever from Indiana.

He’s won 31 state titles in various categories, tied for the most ever with a shooter who has since retired.

“And Bruce will probably get some more before he’s done,” says longtime shooting buddy Larry Easley of Ossian. “That’s unbelievable.”

Better than perfect

At the world championship last October in San Antonio, Texas, 700 shooters competed from as far away as South Africa and New Zealand. Thirty-three broke all 100 clay targets, recording a perfect score.

No one was surprised. At the upper levels of skeet shooting these days, with better guns and more people with the resources to focus on the details that separate the good shooters from the great, that’s not unusual.

“If you miss one shot out of a hundred, in this game, that will hurt you,” says Christian, who’s competed in the world shoot for two decades and has often made it into the shoot-off rounds that inevitably, eventually, produce a winner.

Each round consists of one box of 24 shells, with each shooter firing “doubles” – clay targets released from both sides at once, with one going high and one low.

“It typically takes three to seven boxes to get a winner,” says Christian, who had previously made it as far as runner-up. “I’ve run seven boxes before and lost.”

At the 2016 world shoot, however, fate

Zanesville’s Bruce Christian is a world champion skeet shooter

smiled on Christian, perhaps rewarding him for his year of struggles.

He won after just one round – the only shooter out of 33 of the world’s best who “cleared the box” without missing a single target.

The will to win

Ask Easley what makes Christian so special, and he’ll cite his work ethic: 227,100 lifetime targets. That’s the number of shots fired in competition alone, not including practice.

“I don’t know where that ranks, but it’s right up there. Bruce competes all over the Midwest every weekend. He practices all the time. He shoots all over,” says Easley, 76, who once ran the Wells County Conservation Club northwest of Ossian but, like Christian, has migrated to the much larger St. Joe Valley Conservation Club in DeKalb County.

Easley says that when he met Christian, a Michigan native who moved here in the late 1980s to work for Jet Motor Transport in Fort Wayne, “he was a trap shooter, and not a very good one.”

Christian got hooked on skeet shooting in 1994 after attending a workshop in Atlanta. Though he still occasionally does some trap shooting at the Wells County club, he says it’s too narrow for skeet shooting, in which shots are fired at an angle that can travel off the property.

“It’s easier to learn, but harder to master,” he says. “You have to be a perfectionist – a type A personality. You have to want to win. And you have to have fun doing it.”

Growing up, the 6-foot-4 Christian played baseball, soccer and football. No matter what the sport, “you want to win,” he says.

He was the same way in golf. “My neighbor girl thought I played golf for a living,” he jokes. “Working second shift, I played four or five times a week.”

But working on concrete all day as a welder and a heavy duty truck mechanic took its toll on his body. After neck and back surgery, he gave up golf. A couple of years ago he was forced into early retirement.

The upside: More time to practice shooting. Though he doesn’t know how much longer his back will hold out for that, either.



Bruce Christian’s family made a surprise appearance at the St. Joe Valley Conservation Club in DeKalb County on May 26, when he was presented with a special monument commemorating his world championship. Julie Christian, second from left, is a librarian in Ossian as well as the Zanesville town clerk. Also pictured are daughter Sara Mroczkowski, husband Matt and their children Tessa and Keaton. (Photos by Tanya Isch Caylor)

A special tribute

Julie Christian doesn’t care for shotguns. To her, skeet shooting is loud, “kind of scary” and, well, boring.

“I’d rather watch grass grow,” admits the Ossian librarian who also serves as Zanesville town clerk.

But when shooters from all over the country gathered at the St. Joe gun club after the Kolar Mid-America Open in May to surprise her husband with a monument commemorating his world title, she didn’t want to miss it.

After Easley paid tribute to his friend’s career highlights, with a little help from Christian’s 7-year-old granddaughter, Tessa Mroczkowski, she and her 3-year-old brother, Keaton, pulled the tarp off a rock bearing their grandpa’s name.

Afterward, Christian held Keaton and grinned as Tessa played with the world championship ring it took him 22 years to win.

He’d love it if his grandkids took up skeet shooting someday. It’s a scholarship sport more colleges are adding, thanks to the efforts of devoted youth instructors like Easley.

“But they’d have to want to do it,” he says.

On this day, it was enough that they were there, enjoying his moment in the limelight. ♦



Bruce Christian of Zanesville displays the ring and belt buckle he won for his world championship title in 28-gauge skeet shooting last October in San Antonio, Texas.



Bruce Christian of Zanesville, the reigning world champion in 28-gauge skeet shooting, practices his craft.

Keith Huffman's work gets national recognition

By MARK MILLER

One shouldn't be surprised that Bluffton attorney Keith Huffman won the Powley Award in 2016. Not when you read the description.

This award is presented to a NAELA member who has demonstrated a commitment to promote, in the minds of the general public, a greater understanding of the rights and needs of the elderly and people with special needs and of how elder law attorneys advocate for those rights.

That pretty much encapsulates what Huffman has been doing for the bulk of his career after obtaining his law degree from Indiana University and joining what was then the David Dale law firm in 1983.

"Historically, the firm did a lot of estate planning, and then we began getting more into helping people plan for and deal with going into nursing homes," he explains. "We began to kind of specialize in that and started to advocate for the elderly and disabled."

How do you become an advocate? Huffman joined the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys and then helped found the Indiana chapter. He has served as that group's president and continues to serve on its board of directors. That involvement has

led to his testifying at a number of committee hearings on bills considered by the Indiana Legislature.

He became active in the Northeast Indiana Council on Aging and In Home Services. The non-profit which is funded by several government agencies, "is one of the most progressive councils in the country," he says. "We've moved toward a more pro-active healthcare model with a focus on helping people 'age in place' — which means they remain in their homes rather than go to a nursing home."

He admits to a passion for Advanced Care Planning. Through his personal work and his involvement with the state chapter of NAELA, Huffman was influential getting the new Indiana Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST) system passed into law.

"Living wills," he says, "are basically worthless, yet that is the question most often asked when you are admitted to a hospital." He wants to change that so that more people with a terminal diagnosis complete and have a POST form, which will give health care workers much better guidance on what type of health care each person desires.

He points to other states, particularly

(Continued on Page 37)



Bluffton attorney Keith Huffman in his office. His advocacy and other efforts in elder law and advance care planning have earned him statewide and national recognition. (Photo by Mark Miller)

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A peaceful corner of Wells County

A Union Township couple has ensured that 25 acres of their 'Peace Farm' will be preserved in its natural state

By **KAYLEEN REUSSER**

Jann Prince's ability and determination to devote much of her life to competing and training in the sport of powerlifting may have origins in her bloodlines.

Prince who lives outside of Zanesville, relates she shares genes with Max Schmeling, the German world heavyweight boxing champion who reigned from 1930 to 1932. "Schmeling is a third cousin on my father's side," she said.

In the 1980s, Prince, who lived in Fort Wayne at the time, became the first woman in Allen County to win a weightlifting title in the 114-pound weight class. "My best lifts were squat and deadlift at 300 pounds," she said. "My best bench press was 135 pounds at 116-pound and 122-pound weight classes."

Prince went on to win an ADEPA National Powerlifting title in 1987. She also served as a meet director and officiated at world weightlifting events. One element of all of the competitions Prince was involved with was that they be done without steroids or other chemicals. "I only wanted to work with drug-free athletes," she said.

That desire to get into shape and be strong and healthy was not always a part of Prince's life. After graduating in 1970 from New Haven High School, she smoked cigarettes, barely exercised and ate unhealthy foods. Through the encouragement of friends and family, she dropped bad health habits and began lifting weights at the YWCA on Wells Street

in Fort Wayne. As a single mother, she also worked as a dump truck driver.

In 1983, after winning a multitude of awards and titles, Prince quit the truck driving job and opened Jann's Power Gym on Brooklyn Avenue in Fort Wayne. Later, she passed the NSCA-CPT (National Strength and Conditioning Association-Certified Personal Trainer) Certification.

Today, Prince continues to coach at her drug-free gym while living on a 33-acre piece of land in northwestern Wells County with her husband, Wayne Close. The couple calls the property, which includes a horse barn and their log cabin home, "Peace Farm Nature Preserve."

Much of the woodland and prairie ecosystem is filled with trails Prince and others have cleared. "This same land was part of a treaty held by the Miami Indians," she said.

In 2014, Prince felt compelled to ensure the property would always remain in its natural state and donated 25 acres to ACRES. The ACRES organization is based in Allen County and acquires and owns various tracts of land with the purpose of preserving it to protect natural resources and minimize human impact.

Prince's donation was made as a reserved life estate. "My family will continue to use and enjoy the property privately for up to 75 years after my death," she said. (Her son and a grandson live in Fort Wayne).

After 75 years, ACRES gains full control of the property. ACRES never sells



Jann Prince of Zanesville lives on a 33-acre piece of land with her chocolate Labrador Cocoa and her husband, Wayne Close. The couple calls the parcel "Peace Farm Nature Preserve" and have donated 25 acres to ACRES Land Trust. (Photo by Kayleen Reusser)

nature preserves, so a land donation to ACRES permanently protects the land for future generations.

Prince continues to stay active by teaching fitness lessons, riding horses,

kayaking, biking and hiking with her chocolate Labrador, 'Cocoa'.

"I want to be an inspiration for people," she said. "I want to be a good example." ♦



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John Kochert looks back on 21 years with Northern Wells

By GLEN WERLING

There's a sign over the doorway of John Kochert's office at the Norwell High School/Middle School complex. It reads, "men."

Clearly it was pulled off of the doorway of a men's restroom somewhere.

"The guys put that up there," laughed Kochert one breezy warm April afternoon when the weather fairly sang that spring was here. "I forgot about that being there."

It shows the affection they have for their boss, the maintenance supervisor for Northern Wells Community Schools, who will be retiring Aug. 4.

He has 16 custodians and three maintenance employees who work under him.

"You're only as good as your staff and we've got a bunch of talented guys here. They've helped me out a lot. They've learned some from me, but I've learned a lot from them," said Kochert. "Without a good staff, I would have been spinning my

wheels."

Kochert may very well be the only school maintenance supervisor with a teaching degree. His dad told him not to choose construction as a vocation. He told him to go to college and get a degree.

He did.

Kochert's degree was from St. Francis University in general science, health and physical education. "I wanted to coach," he recalls with a smile.

The DeKalb County native and Eastside High School graduate, however, has never taught as a vocation.

"I worked my way through college. It took me seven years and by the time I got out of college, the market was flooded with teachers," Kochert said. Plus he was earning twice as much in construction as he could as a first-year teacher.

He worked for the same company as his father and his grandfather — W.A. Sheets of Fort Wayne.



Longtime Northern Wells Buildings and Grounds Supervisor John Kochert will be retiring Aug. 4. (Photo by Glen Werling)

"They're out of business now, so I guess I'm glad I got this job," Kochert laughed.

So how did Kochert, who still lives in Leo, end up at Northern Wells?

W.A. Sheets was performing the contract work for Christian Care in 1988. Kochert was selected to meet with Mick

Cupp and Bob Troxel, who were members of the board for the Christian Care building project. At that time, Cupp was president of the Northern Wells Community Schools board.

In 1995, there was an addition project to Christian Care. "We hit it off really well during the first project and they asked me

to come down and be in charge of the addition project," Kochert recalled.

About halfway through the project, Cupp approached Kochert and told him that then buildings and grounds supervisor at Northern Wells, Max Tarr, was thinking about retiring. Cupp wanted to know if Kochert would be interested in the job.

"I told him no. I had 27 years of construction with the same company," Kochert recalled. But then he gave it a second thought. "I thought maybe opportunity only knocks once."

In February of 1996, he came on board at Northern Wells.

"It's been a great job, I've never regretted the move. "I've always liked the school setting, but I like construction, too, so it was the best of both worlds for me," he said.

He's seen a lot of changes in 21 years. Lots of updates and lots of computerization.

"One of the biggest changes

(Continued on Page 27)

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Father and son, at your service

John Whicker's on the Bluffton Common Council and Seth Whicker's on the Wells County Council, both in their first terms

By DAVE SCHULTZ

Seth Whicker figures he comes by it naturally.

Seth is serving his first term as a member of the Wells County Council. His father, John, is also a newcomer to elected office, serving his first term as a member of the Bluffton Common Council.

Seth's wife, Cari, is the daughter of Jeff Espich, who served 20 years representing Wells County in the Indiana House of Representatives. Between his father and his father-in-law, elected office was something he felt he could do.

"I would say both Jeff and my dad were mentors in that process," he said. "A lot of it, when you are looking at running for county office, is understanding the county. No two people in my mind — both were Wells County Citizens of the Year — are better at understanding the county."

Espich has advised his son-in-law on the interaction between the state and local government; as Seth puts it, "he knows that stuff like the back of his hand."

"When you think of all those years Jeff served in Indianapolis, he always kept Wells County in the heart of everything he did," he says. "And then you look at my dad and you look at everything they (Jeff and John) are involved in here in the county, it's amazing. Then you look at my wife, serving on the State Board of Education, and now soon to be the principal at Southern Wells Elementary, the county means a lot to me. I was born and raised here. It's just nice to be back and get more involved."

Seth Whicker was approached by Jim Van Winkle, longtime member and president of the County Council, and Ralph Garcia, who at the time chaired the Wells County Republican Party, about the idea of running for the council in 2016. He said yes and is essentially filling the spot vacated when Van Winkle opted not to run for re-election.

His father's path to elected office was a little different. He had run against an incumbent previously, losing to Mike Kracium in a general election for the District 4 seat on County Council. He still wanted to serve, however, and saw an

opening when Bette Erxleben opted not to run for re-election for District 1 on the Bluffton Common Council two years ago.

"I thought it was an opportunity for me to step in to local government," John said during a joint interview with his son. "City council is the smallest geographic area."

What he learned from that previous attempt at public office was how hard it was to run against an incumbent but also how hard it is to get out and knock on doors to ask for someone's vote.

"In Bluffton, believe it or not, there were only a couple of times that people were what I would call rude," he said. "For the most part, people will smile. They may not vote for you, but at least they're polite."

In 2015, then, John ran for the Bluffton Common Council and won decisively.

He's taken to the position like it's a four-year sprint. He's not a member of the Bluffton Board of Public Works and Safety, but he's there as often as anyone.

"I have a thirst for knowledge, how things work," he said. "I really feel that the Board of Works is where the nuts and bolts of things occur. I feel like it's important for me to show support for the folks who run the city."

"One of the things I have concluded with my service on the council is that the city employees have a pretty good benefits package but they're not overpaid by any stretch of the imagination, and they're good people. We can only pay what taxes will support, but one thing that I have learned early on is that we have a dedicated bunch of employees."

Beyond that, he said, there are things he ought to know. If sewer rates are going up, for instance, he wants to know why and everything he can find out about it.

"If I'm going to be held accountable for it as a council member, I want to know what's going on," he said.

Seth Whicker works at a financial company (SYM) and has a degree in financial analysis and a masters degree in financial planning. He's a certified financial planner a well. "I deal with numbers all the time," he said.

"What's interesting in my line of work



John Whicker, foreground, and his son Seth are each serving their first term in elected office — John as a member of the Bluffton Common Council and Seth as a member of the Wells County Council. They're shown prior to June's County Council meeting in the Wells Carnegie Government Annex. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

is that we don't sell any financial products. I think that's very important," he said. "In my role on county council, I'm a fiduciary to the taxpayers of the county. In talking with my dad, I know that if you're going to make a decision, you better be informed."

For example: The Wells County Highway Department occupies a garage on Bluffton's west side that Seth describes as "not the most attractive place in the world."

"It's been presented that something needs to be done there," he said. "So the first thing I did is I made an appointment

and went out there and got a tour and looked at it. If you're going to spend taxpayer dollars, you've got to — as my dad said — educate yourself on those issues. If I'm going to spend money on this, is it the wisest of things to do?"

"Then you've got to ask the questions during the meetings that may not be the most comfortable ones at times. The commissioners or whoever is asking may not agree with you at times. In the end, you have to do what's best for taxpayers."

"With my clients, that's the way I operate."

(Continued on Page 27)

A 'self-reliant' Parsons is the CEO of Bluffton Regional

By KAYLEEN REUSSER

While playing the sport of lacrosse in high school, Brent Parsons was usually team captain. "I have always liked being a leader, but not because I desire glory," he said. "I like being a leader because I hate seeing things go undone."

With this willing spirit of helping people, Parsons is serving as CEO of Bluffton Regional Medical Center, a position he has held since August 2016. He replaced Aaron Garofola who was appointed Dupont Hospital's chief executive officer earlier in 2016. Parsons had worked as assistant CEO at Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne since 2015.

BRMC is part of the Lutheran Health System.

Prior to arriving in Fort Wayne, Parsons was employed at a number of health care facilities in Utah and the Seattle area while earning a degree in business administration and finance from Brigham Young University. He earned that bachelor's degree in 2012 and then a master's in healthcare administration from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities School of Public

Health in 2015.

Parsons is fluent in Portuguese as a result of volunteering two years in Sao Paulo, Brazil from August 2008 through August 2010. The term of service was part of a missions program associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, of which he is a member.



As CEO of Bluffton Regional Medical Center, Brent Parsons is anxious to serve the people of Wells County and surrounding area. (Photo by Kayleen Reusser)

The time away from home included limited contact with family and friends. It taught Parsons many skills he uses in his current role as CEO.

"I learned to be self-reliant during my time in South America," he said. "I had volunteered to serve wherever I was assigned, despite having no language skills. Admittedly, it was a challenge to be immersed in a different culture and not understand people. After being homesick for a few weeks and even regretting my decision, I decided to make a go of it and worked hard."

Each day, Parsons studied the language with a native speaker. He and a male companion then worked with people in the community, either talking with them about their faith or encouraging people to kick addictions and attend church. "We did whatever was needed to help people, including gardening," he said.

Part of Parsons' work ethic and attitude of service to others, especially in the medical field, may have developed from his upbringing.

"My mother was a nurse in obstetrics," he said. "Conversations at home were often about medical matters and the

valuable skill of nurturing." When Parsons received mentoring advice by a hospital administrator about payroll, human resources, patient care and employees, he knew that was the career path he wanted. His goal is to bring that same enthusiasm to his position and staff.

"I want our employees to have a pride in working here," he said. "I want them to feel confident about me. I'm willing to work hard and serve this community to the best of my ability. I'm willing to go to bat for people." ♦



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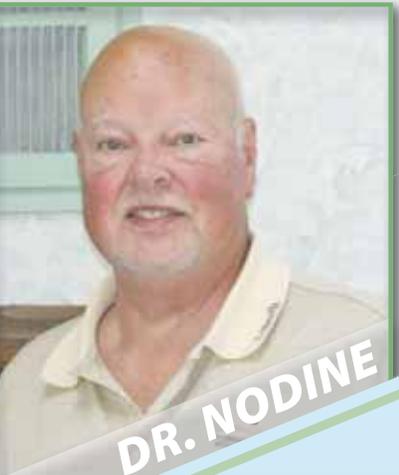
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Battling drugs ...

Reformers Unanimous offers a different approach to helping in addiction recovery

By JESSICA BRICKER

Carl Stephan, the director of the Bluffton Reformers Unanimous Chapter, is quick to note that he does not see it as their own program; this is "God's program."

"RU is a biblically based, Christ-centered recovery program, designed to rescue, recover, and restore those in addictive behaviors with the power of the hidden life found only in Jesus Christ," the organization's website says. "RU is an addiction recovery class that started in Rockford, Ill., and offers residential help for addicted men and ladies, that now has expanded into churches, prisons, and online resources across (American) communities and around the world."

Stephan said they "don't promote church" and all people are welcome. The program aims to offer to addicts an extra pillar of support through churches.

"Our goal isn't to beat them over the head with Bibles," added Brian Taylor, who helped Stephan start the group. "That just doesn't work."

The idea to bring an RU group to town

came to them as the pair made the drives to and from Madison Correctional Facility in a Chevy Blazer to visit a friend of Taylor. They believed there had to be something they could do to help with the community's drug problem. Visiting high schools and churches were ideas. They talked with probation and community corrections, Taylor said, and knew they wanted to do something a little different than what was already available.

"We have the answer," Stephan said of helping end the addiction epidemic. "There's no doubt."

The men say they met for a year just praying about it: Is this something they wanted to start or not?

In the end, they felt led in this direction, the men said. They did the research, went through the training and adopted the program, becoming the 1,027th RU chapter in the nation. It meets from 7 to 9 p.m. at Grace Baptist Church, 1621S-350E.

The program has grown from there, seeing 15 to 30 people a week. This August will mark two years. Stephan said he feels like they have come together as a team.



Carl Stephan, left, and Brian Taylor lead the Bluffton chapter of Reformers Unanimous. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

"The beauty of this program is the heart of the people involved," Taylor said.

Stephan said he has been discouraged at times. He's thought of quitting and walking away. Instead, he is compelled forward.

Since the start, the men have had a mantra: "If we help one person, it's worth

it."

Taylor wants addicts to know that they are human beings, that they have value. Reformed addicts, once they are clean, are the most unstoppable people, he added.

There is nothing they can't overcome, he concluded. ♦

Couple starts Parents Against Drug Abuse to offer support and education

By JESSICA BRICKER

When Terry Gerber delivers his pamphlets around town to help spread the word of the group he and his wife Linda created, "Parents Against Drug Abuse," he said he hears a common response: "It's about time."

The group first started meeting in December 2016. He and his wife hope to continue the group each Friday, meeting during a break-out session as part of the Reformers Unanimous meeting, held from 7 to 9 p.m. at Grace Baptist Church.

Linda also leads the "Free In Deed" band, which performs at RU meetings. She sings and plays guitar.

Terry told the few people in attendance during the first session that some are feeling angry, lonely or sorrowful. This is a chance to get those feelings out and talk about it, he said.

"And believe me," he said, "we need it."

Brian Taylor, who along with Carl Stephan started the Bluffton chapter of Reformers Unanimous, is supportive of the group meeting during RU. Stephan said he's glad to have them as part of the RU program because organizers don't want to exclude anyone in finding support.

Getting together and having someone to vent to, Taylor added, will help.

They want to offer support to learn, grow and overcome, Linda said. They also want to spread the support and knowledge through outreach efforts.

Addiction is hard to deal with by oneself, and everyone has stories of the agony they've gone through, she added. It's a disease and the addicts need to know they are loved, she said.

The group's overall agenda will focus



Linda and Terry Gerber have started a group called "Parents Against Drug Abuse" as a way to offer support and education. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

on the participants' needs and address answers they are seeking to questions they have.

"You're not alone anymore," she told the group in December. "We're going to be a pact that's uplifting one another." ♦

John Kochert

(Continued from Page 23)

has been technology," he said. When he first started, if he needed a part for something, he would search through books. Now he just goes on the internet — and he can use the internet to search for better prices for that part.

"We used to move snow with little Simplicity tractors, but the board has bought us the equipment we need to be more efficient and make things easier," Kochert said.

From his home in Leo, Kochert also has video access to the schools' security cameras. He doesn't have to drive all the way to Ossian to see if the snow is bad enough that parking lots and walkways will need plowing.

When plowing snow he has to start at 5 a.m. "We pride ourselves with our lots. We think we clean them really well."

Kochert's retirement plans include his ongoing restoration of his 1971 Chevrolet Nova Supersport. He's the original owner of the car. He bought it for \$3,150 new. It's being restored by 1982 Norwell grad

Brian Graft. Once the restoration is complete, Kochert plans to take the car to area car shows. He also wants to travel and do some visiting with grandchildren.

"I'm 66. It was a hard decision. I like this area and I like the school, but I've got to let it go sometime," said Kochert.

He added, "I'm going to miss the people. I'll miss the social end of the job. I walk down the hallways of the school and I know them and now I find myself thinking, 'This is all going to end,'" Kochert said.

For 21 years he's been in charge of the buildings and grounds and that has made both feel like they were Kochert's. "Even though I know they're not my buildings, they've always seemed like they were," he said.

"I told (Superintendent) Scott Mills that on my last day, Aug. 4, I'm just going to walk around, reminisce about all of the changes and take one good last look," said Kochert.

"But once I give them the keys, it's done. It's been a good ride." ♦

John and Seth Whicker

(Continued from Page 24)

John is 73 and is the lone rookie on the Bluffton council. He's a little concerned about what's ahead for that body. Mayor Ted Ellis is in his sixth terms. Jim Phillabaum, Melanie Durr, Mike Morrissey, and Carl Perry are veterans on the council.

"There's the potential for the loss of so much memory," he said. "I feel a little bit of responsibility to make sure that things continue."

Both men say they'd be willing to run and serve for another office if, as Seth puts it, "it would make sense and would work out."

"I wouldn't want to do it just for the sake of doing it, if that makes sense," he

said. "I am running a business and doing some other things, I would bring some unique attributes, possibly, but it would have to be the right situation."

On the other hand, John said, "At 73 you don't know what your health is. It's on the table."

There's another thing that John wants said. He served 16 years as president of Bi-County Services, and working with special needs individuals has been a passion of his.

"Seth is chairman of the board of Pathfinder Services (in Huntington), and my other son, Eric, is on the board of ARC of Fort Wayne," he said. "I'm glad that passion continues with them." ♦



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Derek Myers' start-up marked its 10th anniversary in 2016 amid an ever-changing business landscape

By MARK MILLER

There was a moment in 2016 that Derek Myers realized his company was marking its 10th anniversary, but little thought was given to a celebration. There just wasn't time.

Neoti was in the midst of adjusting, reinventing and realigning ... again ... adapting to the rapidly changing landscape of the technology and digital world the company stepped into in 2006. About the only common denominators of the Neoti of 2006 and today is the word "digital" and Myers himself.

At one point in either 2013 or 2014 — Myers is not sure — when the company was getting heavily into rentals of digital signs and screens, a businessman approached him and asked him how he had found his way into this business.

"Well," he replied, "it's kind of a long story..."

A 1996 Norwell grad, he was majoring in marketing and business at Franklin College when "this thing called the internet" caught his attention. In the fall of his junior year, he changed his major to computer science and promised his fiancée, high school sweetheart Kelli Milton, that'd he'd still graduate on time. That meant 22 credit hours and then 23 hours in his senior semesters, but he fulfilled that promise "so that she would marry a college graduate," he says with a grin.

After getting laid off from a website developer in Indianapolis after just seven months, a high school friend invited him to join him in the mortgage origination business in Cincinnati. The timing was right. The two were soon asked to open a new office in Columbus where they hired and supervised 15 brokers. He then met some young entrepreneurs who encouraged him to set up a real estate finance company.

"It was a crazy time," he recalls. He was setting his own hours, working with some high-

powered investors such as New England Patriots player Mike Grabel, producing "30 to 35" loans a month.

But he and Kelly were ready to start a family and wanted to do that back home. So he got his Indiana real estate license and set up a new company of his own, moved to Fort Wayne, bought a big house in Aboite Township and brokered loans — bundling and re-selling them.

His timing was good; the market was still strong. "Another crazy time," Myers says. But he was getting some nudges.

"I really felt my life was not where God wanted it to be," he shares. He and Kelli had had their first child, a girl they named Sydney. They were not happy being the youngest couple "by far" in the neighborhood and he wasn't happy with his lifestyle. He saw a help-wanted ad for a loan officer at the First Bank of Berne and got the job. The couple sold their house and moved to a small apartment in Ossian.

Their timing was good again. Shortly after the move, the family received news of a medical diagnosis that would add some challenges in the days and years to come. So for the next four years, he worked at the bank and was able to focus on the health needs of the family.

"It has been an adjustment to the life that we had planned," he says, "but we are so grateful that everyone is doing so well."

He doesn't recall the exact date, but a "very young" recent Bluffton High School graduate, Josh Mitchell, approached him at a Chamber of Commerce event. He had heard Myers had a technology degree and had started his own business. Would he be interested in exploring some ideas?

Another crazy time. "I'd work at the bank, put the kids to bed, and then work on concepts and some programming basics until two or three in the morning. Get up, work at the bank, help put the kids to bed..." In a few



Derek Myers, far left, with his team of Neoti employees in Bluffton: front, from left, Jason Heckber, Ryan Syrkus, and Joe Kipfer; in back, Eric Hadler, Dawn Tudor, Todd Fiechter, Olivia Reeves, Ray Long and Aaron Kipfer. (Photo provided)

months, in the fall of 2006, they (Myers, Mitchell and Mitchell's high school friend Mike Moorefield) felt comfortable with a concept and incorporated a new company.

"Neoti" is an acronym that Mitchell and Moorefield had come up with while still in high school. It stands for "Next Electronics On The Internet." Myers says it was the perfect fit for what they had in mind.

The original concept was to become "the nation's largest community-oriented digital signage network" by placing flat-screen TVs in restaurants and then selling advertisements around locally-oriented content. They saw it as a combination of several industries: billboards, newspapers, radio and television.

The winter was filled with presentations — lining up locations for the screens, lining up some local investors and advertisers. By the spring of 2007, Myers left the bank. "I was a little nervous, but pretty confident," he recalls.

Neoti was off and running.

His new company would take him on a wild ride: Trips to eastern Europe and several to China, meeting celebrities and race car drivers, hiring and firing, changing course, adapting to change. But always learning.

In late 2007, Mitchell and Moorefield decided to pursue other web-related opportunities in Indianapolis. By the spring of 2008, Myers had built a network of 80 installations and had become the largest network in the midwest. Lutheran Hospital was looking at putting his units in all its waiting areas, East Chicago Pizza was looking at chain-wide installation and local Subway franchisee Jim Miller had set up a meeting with that chain's decision makers.

Then the fall of 2008 brought the Great Recession; every one of those prospects bailed out. "Every. Single. One," Myers says, emphasizing every word.

A near-death late-diagnosed ruptured appendix only complicated things further with a week in the hospital and a long recovery. He had six or seven employ-

ees, some local investors and he and his wife had invested their savings as well.

"We re-invented ourselves," he says. A new hire out of Indianapolis brought the concept of portable trailer units with large LED screens, which were available at a reduced price thanks to the same recession that had nearly put them under. They began taking those screens to events, where one of the agencies they were working with said, "Since you're at the event, what else can you do for us?" That led to "brand activation" campaigns for new products, a service that included the digital signs as well as handing out literature or samples, taking surveys, purchasing a couple of bicycles that pulled digital signs and hiring "talent" — models to carry signs or wear the brand's clothing. They even tested some mini-blimps for events.

Meanwhile, the digital networks in existing restaurants continued but a lack of industry standardization became a problem. They would close that effort



A portion of Neoti's building on Lancaster Street includes "the boneyard." In left photo company founder Derek Myers holds the very first flat screen TV the company bought and is standing next to two bicycles that pulled digital LED screens around the Indianapolis 500 and other venues. In right picture, he is next to the "latest and greatest" — the crates contain a 10mm Sports Arena LED, the 2.9mm cable-less rental panels and the very latest 1.5mm Ultra HD LED panels capable of becoming up to 20-foot 4K video walls for broadcast studios and high-end corporate boardrooms. (Photos by Mark Miller)

down in 2010 and focus on the events — changing from a digital ad agency to a digital rental company. Contracts took them to a Super Bowl, Colts games, college tailgate events, rock and pop concerts where they'd have backstage access, working with a number of artists. The Indianapolis 500 became a key annual event, at one point doing a deal with an Indy Car team so the Neoti logo was on that team's three race cars.

At this point, Myers had 19 employees with an office in Indianapolis. "We realized we were getting more calls to rent our screens," he says. "We could make more money doing that than we could selling ads." They soon sold their first large screen to a concert venue.

This took them to Prague and Romania and then Frankfurt, Germany, in search of a source for used and new LED screens and modular units. This took them from

19 employees to just four, including himself: Aaron Kipfer had joined Myers very early on and has weathered several storms with Myers. Joe Kipfer and then part-time administrations coordinator Dawn Tudor completed the crew.

Some of their university customers asked whether the screens' portability would allow moving the football screens inside for basketball. "This really gained

(Continued on Page 31)

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They're tough kids in the 'gentle way'

10-year-old Cody Cox and 14-year-old Paige Cox are among the best in their age groups in judo

By MATTHEW LeBLANC

To call Cody Cox and his sister, Paige Cox, "accomplished" would be a bit of an understatement.

Both dedicated judo competitors, the Wells County pair have been to martial arts tournaments near and far. They've taken down competitors from the United States and around the world. They've spent much of their lives earning accolades from judo experts.

Cody is 10 years old. Paige is 14.

Theirs is a sport that ranks far below basketball and baseball on the popularity scale, but the brother/sister tandem is working to be as successful as possible in it. They are also working to grow the sport.

"(Paige) is also hoping to continue to introduce judo to the community," their mother, Jill Cox, said in an email after her daughter returned from a tournament in Japan earlier this year. "Who knows? Maybe there is another little girl out there that just wants an opportunity to be great.

"Maybe Paige's story can inspire."

And it is that, inspiring. Both of the siblings' stories are inspiring.

Japanese for "the gentle way," judo was created in the late 19th century when an educator took over a martial arts training facility when his mentor died. The discipline is focused more on taking down opponents through balance and technique rather than strength.

Since then, judo has spread to dojos



Paige Cox and her brother, Cody Cox, smile after earning medals this year at a judo tournament in Florida. (Photo provided)

around the world. One of those is Judan Judo in Portland, where Cody and Paige train.

There, they work out, practice and spar with other "judoka," or judo players. But they are often the star pupils.

He is younger than his sister, but Cody

actually picked up judo earlier. He started participating in the sport around age 6 — after kindergarten — to lose some weight and try something new.

"At first, I didn't want to," he said. "I wasn't even sure what it was. It was more of a physical fitness thing. But I started to realize this is actually fun. I realized I love judo."

The gamble has paid off, as Cody is now ranked No. 1 by USA Judo, one of the sport's governing bodies. Ask him and he'll say he doesn't care about the ranking.

Press a little harder, though, and he smiles.

"My favorite thing about judo is competing," Cody said in May. "You get all

pumped up about it."

They have competed in tournaments in several states in the Midwest — in late January, they both took home top honors from a competition in Michigan. They have also traveled to competitions in Texas and Florida.

Jill Cox said she often spends time scanning calendars and the family bank accounts, working to determine which trips they can make and when.

"There are a lot of great tournaments in the Midwest," she said. "Some of the tournaments, it works out to have a little vacation."

One of those "little vacations" — for her and Paige, at least — is coming this winter. Paige has been invited back to the Sanix Judo Championship in Japan.

Each year, Fukuoka, a city of about 1.4 million on one of the country's southernmost islands, hosts the Sanix judo tournament for teens from around the world. The competition, a combination tournament/training and practice event, regularly draws judoka from the U.S., Australia, Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, Russia, among others.

Paige was one of only a handful of girls on the U.S. team last year, and she's been invited back to compete in December.

She won more contests than she lost last year, but she is more excited about the friendships she's gained and the new cultures she got to experience on the trip, her first outside the U.S.

Paige, Cody and their mother, Jill, each say judo is great at teaching discipline, physical fitness and mental toughness. But the sport also is a community in which competitors are also supporters; opponents are also friends.

"I obviously have my blood family — but I also have my judo family," Paige said. ♦



Paige Cox, of rural Ossian, in action against two different opponents at a recent judo tournament. (Photos provided)





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Bluffton was part of a multi-million-dollar remodel of the Kansas University football locker room. Neoti designed, sold and installed a ribbon of ultra-high definition LED screens above all of the locker spaces. (Photo provided)

Innovate, adapt

(Continued from Page 29)

momentum," Myers said.

An early key customer in this new effort was Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne; the athletic director soon took a new job at Western Illinois University where Neoti landed another contract. That would ultimately lead to a remarkable project at the University of Kansas, where they successfully bid on a project to install "a ribbon of ultra-high-def LED screens" around the school's new football locker room.

Begun in the fall of 2016 and completed very early this year, Kansas officials reported to Myers they had their best recruiting year in more than a decade "and they attributed a big part of that to the new locker room," Myers says.

Today, Neoti has 10 employees in Bluffton plus a marketing manager working out of his home in Vermont and a sales manager in New York city. That is after yet another transformation much more focused on sales and service of large, high-resolution LED screens and modules.

The journey has taken the firm from its original location in the GBM Building (behind Dairy Queen) to an office in Mick Cupp's building on Oak Forest Drive to across the street, then down-sized back to GBM and then when growth came back, to the building on Lancaster Street once occupied by General Manufacturing. They never dreamed they would fill that 8,000 square feet, Myers says, but recently leased another 8,000 square feet across town and are keeping an eye out for more space.

That transformation meant several trips

to China to find a manufacturing partner and then Chinese engineers traveling to Bluffton to train service technicians. The service portion of the business has grown tremendously.

"We just picked up one of the top three rental and staging companies in the world," Myers continues. "We do the repair of their LED units. We are probably one of the top LED repair centers in the midwest if not one of top 10 in the country." The one "huge advantage" Neoti offers is a quick turnaround time.

There were opportunities to move to Fort Wayne, Chicago and Indianapolis. Each time, he considered his employees and his family and his local supporters and the sense of community that Bluffton provides.

Those supporters, he says, include investors who never lost faith in him during the business and personal struggles. He also credits several mentors who he has identified and sought out over the years. "I've pestered them for years: 'How do you do what you do and why?' and see if it applies."

Myers was encouraged to apply for a business mentoring program. Neoti was accepted, which brought coaches and analysts to Bluffton. Suggestions included the building's layout.

"They introduced us to professionals across the country who help you understand who you are as an entrepreneur, help to develop a team concept, perceiving your vision, making a plan and strategy," Myers explains.

"It was a great learning process. We

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Miracles come in all sizes

Southern Wells High School student Alexis Eckelbarger overcomes all odds to succeed

By GLEN WERLING

To the casual observer, Alexis Eckelbarger is just like any other teenage girl making the transition from her sophomore to her junior year at Southern Wells High School.

What can't be seen is the mental boxing gloves she's wearing. She's a fighter. Her friends and family know it — and so do her teachers.

That's why two of her teachers recommended her for special recognition by the Southern Wells Community Schools Board at a meeting last February.

When Alexis was 11, she was at a friend's house who had a go-kart track around his backyard.

"He was riding around. I was going to go tell him that lunch was ready," Alexis recalled.

She doesn't remember much of anything after that.

She was hit by the go-kart and dragged 500 feet, said Christina Barger, Alexis's mother.

At first, the people at Eckelbarger's friend's house thought she would be OK.

"I wasn't there at the time, I got there right after the accident," recalled Barger. "I walked into the house and they kept telling me she hit her head, but they weren't exactly sure what happened."

Alexis was conscious but when Barger tried lifting her daughter's head, she knew there was something terribly wrong. She had a knot on the back of her head that was nothing like Barger had ever seen before.

"I asked her, 'Lexie, are you OK?' and she told me, 'I've got a real bad headache,'" said Barger.

At that point, Alexis's speech became confused and jumbled.

Barger paused a moment and added, "She looked at me and said, 'I think I'm going to die. I love you mommy. I love you daddy.'"

Barger called 911.

The situation continued to deteriorate. Alexis became hysterical. She wasn't making any sense at all. Medical personnel at Bluffton Regional Medical Center placed her in an MRI. She lapsed into unconsciousness.

She was rushed to Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne. On the ride up, Alexis' heart stopped three times. "I was hysterical at the time. I couldn't even ride in the ambulance," said Barger.

Alexis was placed on life support and



Christine Barger, left, and Abby McClain, right, flank Alexis Eckelbarger who survived a traumatic brain injury to return to Southern Wells. (Photo by Glen Werling)

remained there for several days. She had emergency surgery for two skull fractures. A piece of the second skull fracture clipped her optical nerve. "They said she probably would never see again."

It also hit all her major senses. The doctors said she probably would never feel. They said she may never walk again, said Barger.

"She had 378 staples. Her entire head was split," she added.

Alexis didn't regain consciousness until her last full day in the hospital.

Thankfully the doctors were wrong. She does have tunnel vision and there are some other problems as well, but she's alive and she's made tremendous progress since coming home from the hospital.

Alexis didn't return to school until seventh grade. She started with an individual education program — a program tailored to meet her special needs.

"We tried a little bit of school for a couple hours, then a half a day, then a couple days in a row," recalled Barger.

It was difficult at first. "Once I started putting letters and numbers together again, I was really confused," she said. "It was kind of like starting over again."

She felt like she stood out a lot. "I wasn't in the same classes with my friends and I wasn't there all day," Alexis

recalled.

It took Alexis about a year to catch up — and longer to get back to the proficient student she had been. "This year I'm just now getting the grades I used to get in sixth grade," she said.

Teacher Abby McClain said she decided to recommend Alexis for recognition by the school board.

"I've seen the growth in her in the past year and a half. She's grown from someone who was doing things because she had to, to become a leader in the classroom. I see the struggles she goes through, the headaches, the vision loss, the want-

ing to take breaks but having the persistence to move through assignments," said McClain.

That persistence has encouraged Alexis to take on more. "She's seen the results of her hard work and she's flourished," added McClain.

"It was pretty hard in the beginning, but then I realized a year or two ago that I hadn't gotten back to where I had been. I knew I needed to work harder," Alexis said. She hopes she can reach the point where she's back to having straight A grades. "I want to go to college and do something with my life," she said.

"It takes her a lot of work," said McClain. "For some students to get a B, it's almost effortless, but for Alexis, it takes her a lot of work to get that B or an A-minus. I see that work she does. She takes it the extra mile," she added.

"It's been really hard. It's still really hard at times," said Barger. "But she's amazing, I never really thought she would be where she is," said Barger. "It's a miracle. It really is." ♦

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Service of high-definition LED units owned by other companies has become a huge part of Neoti's business model today. At right, Todd Fiechter is working on an LED module that, when placed with others, can form a screen as big as 80-feet long. (Photo by Mark Miller)



Innovate, adapt

(Continued from Page 31)

were able to take that and apply it to redefine ourselves as a sales, service and rental company.”

He also credits a number of local individuals, as well as becoming a member of Rotary. “It was healthy for a young guy to be around guys that were more established in their careers,” he says, “and gave me a sense of pursuit — to say ‘these guys have survived their highs and lows and I could too.’ A good place to go and say ‘I’ll be OK.’”

He continues to be focused on learning. He has engaged the services of a professional business coach.

“If I wasn’t learning from someone else at all times, then how valid would I ever be as a teacher?” he asks. “How valid can you be growing a team if you’re not learning yourself? I love to do that.”

Myers, who recently turned 40, and his team has developed some “huge goals” in terms of revenue and market share.

“We’re excited about the next stages,” he says with enthusiasm. The new focus includes targeting the broadcast indus-

try control rooms, universities and high schools, and selling to production companies.

“In many ways, I feel like we’re getting back to some of our original roots,” he continues, “but with a new identity. We feel pretty confident with who we are today.”

Recent demonstrations have been to the major broadcast networks as well as the Food Channel and the Tribune Company. He has learned about “strategic networking” to help get a small company from rural Indiana into the doors of big companies.

“We are relational in all aspects,” he explains. “We are all attracted to do business with people like ourselves. That’s human nature. So we network.”

“When you have confidence in your capacity to deliver a particular product or service,” he notes, “then convincing these large companies that you’re the right one is very do-able.”

He chuckles when he remembers that inquiry from a businessman about how he got into this business.

“It’s kind of a long story...” ♦

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Steve Darnell sees a 'work in progress'

By MATTHEW LeBLANC

Steve Darnell recently finished up his first year as superintendent at Southern Wells Community Schools.

So, how did it go?

"I would say it's a work in progress," said Darnell, smiling, in early May.

At the end of the school year, district administrators typically consider things like staffing changes, finances and summer construction projects. Darnell has those to think about, but he also will continue to look over tough topics such as plans for Southern Wells' sewage as well as plans to begin busing out-of-corporation students to Southern Wells.



Steve Darnell

Those are weighty topics — and projects he might not have foreseen when he took the job, he admits — but Darnell said he feels as though he's settling into his role at the helm of Southern Wells. He said he also feels like he has learned a lot about the district and that educators and community members have gotten to know him.

"This community is wonderful," he said. "They care about the school. They care about the kids. That is so positive. It's so uplifting."

Darnell was hired to replace Jim Craig, who retired in 2016 after nine years leading Southern Wells. Darnell grew up in Marion and earned degrees from Ball State University, and he is no stranger to Wells County.

He worked as an assistant principal and athletic director at Norwell Middle School from 1998 to 2005. From 2005 to 2009, he was the principal at Lancaster Central Elementary School.

Darnell was the superintendent at East Washington School Corporation in Pekin before coming to Southern Wells.

In an interview with the News-Banner last year, Darnell said he was excited about the opening at Southern



Southern Wells Superintendent Steve Darnell greets sixth-grader Gracie Schmidt at an elementary school graduation ceremony in May. Darnell recently finished his first year as superintendent. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)

Wells, saying at the time that northeast Indiana is "home."

In his first year, Darnell said, he has accomplished much of what he set out to do. He surveyed and learned more about his colleagues. He sought input on the future of Southern Wells from students and members of the community.

Early on in his tenure, Darnell sent surveys to staff members with questions such as, "What are you most proud of?" and "What are some of the top three challenges?"

The district used answers from those surveys to craft a strategic plan for Southern Wells.

"I think we've got a good base to go from now," Darnell said. "People have had a voice."

Another success: Putting in place a revised vision statement for Southern Wells.

"Southern Wells Community Schools is a place where

people are empowered to become their personal best," the statement reads.

"That's big for Southern Wells," Darnell said.

While plans for the future are in place, Darnell will now preside over some important changes. First among them is what to do with the district's sewage treatment plant.

Options being considered include rebuilding the plant and sending the sewage to Montpelier. Both have hefty price tags of more than \$1 million, and they have both been debated heavily by school board members and members of the community.

"It's a struggle when you think of the amount of money that has to go into that sort of thing," he said. "(But) you've got to have the infrastructure in place."

On out-of-district busing, Darnell acknowledges the idea isn't popular with leaders of schools in surrounding areas. But, he notes, parents of students from those areas petitioned Southern Wells to consider busing those children in.

Also, Southern Wells continually has to consider ways to grow its student enrollment in order to keep the school district viable.

The district will also welcome some new faces to Southern Wells in the fall, including new elementary school principal Cari Whicker. At least six other staff members will also be new.

Southern Wells also will add a teacher to teach science, technology, engineering and math.

"Southern Wells does a fantastic job in the sciences and applied sciences," Darnell said. "We need to start doing that earlier."

Darnell said he feels the district has a strong base of educators and community members who keep tabs on the schools and their inner-workings. He said he's looking forward to his second year as superintendent.

"I think people have been receptive," he said. "I think it's important that you listen and learn." ♦

Lynn Elliott, community's top volunteer

By DAVE SCHULTZ

Lynn Elliott's fingerprints are happily, gleefully, all over Wells County.

Elliott was named Volunteer of the Year by the Wells County Foundation last November, and she's thankful for the award. She's even more thankful that she's able to make a difference.

After a career at Southern Wells Elementary School, serving as the school's secretary and treasurer, she figured it was time to be "giving back to the community in which I live."

She received the award at a luncheon and got to celebrate with one of her friends — Bette Erxleben, for whom the award is named.

"I just shared with Bette that I have been asked who I thought was my ideal lady and I said 'Bette Erxleben'

because she kind of embodies everything I want to be," she said after the presentation. "I want to be Bette Erxleben's friend forever."

Elliott's list of volunteer activities includes serving as a charter member, past regent and treasurer of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She volunteered for veterans services by providing lap robes, small decorated Christmas trees, and books to veterans at the Veterans Hospital at Marion. In addition, she was a charter member of the Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War, and also served as president.

She is an active member of the Wells County Historical Society and serves as the board's treasurer. She

researched the information for the society's Cemetery Walks and helped host the Victorian Tea in the Mansion.

She has served as president and secretary of the Wells County Genealogy Society. She is a member and past board president of the Wells County Creative Arts Council. She is a member of Friends of the Library and a past president of the Poneto Community Club.

Elliott also served as an official in the 2016 Bicentennial Torch Relay in Wells County and is assisting with the planning of the Bicentennial celebration coming in December. A reference for Elliott's nomination described her as generous, understanding, empathetic, compassionate, patient and dedicated. ♦



Lynn Elliott, right, is the Wells County Foundation's Volunteer of the Year. She's shown with Bette Erxleben, her good friend and the individual the award is named after. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

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THE NEED FOR SPEED



Terry Fisher Jr. drives his No. 81 car in Champion Racing Association's longer Super Series races of 150-400 laps. He built this car with his father, Avilla Motor Speedway Hall of Fame driver Terry Fisher Sr. Earlier this year Terry Fisher Jr. won the season opener at Lucas Oil Raceway in Clermont driving the No. 28 car for Coe Motorsports. (Courtesy photo)

Ossian's T.J. Fisher has been racing street stock cars since he was 14

By TANYA ISCH CAYLOR

Terry Fisher Jr. grew up watching his dad drive race cars.

Though he wasn't born yet and never got to see them in action, his grandpa and great-grandpa raced, too.

For the fourth-generation driver from Ossian, driving one race car on the Champion Racing Association circuit isn't enough. Besides the No. 81 Super Series car he built with his dad for Fisher Motorsports, he also drives two cars for Coe Motorsports: the No. 28 in the Late Model Sportsman series and an open-wheel modified car.

"Some nights, he may run all three in different events," says his dad, Terry Fisher Sr., a five-time champion at Avilla Motor Speedway who was inducted into the now-defunct track's Hall of Fame in 1995.

T.J., as he's known to family and friends, started racing go-karts when he was 8 years old. By age 14, he was racing street stock cars at Baer Field.

In 2005, the year he graduated from Norwell, Fisher had a deal with NAS-CAR's truck-racing circuit. Unfortunately, a key sponsor pulled out just before he got a chance to live his dream.

"It's frustrating," the elder Fisher said. "You see a young kid with a lot of talent, who's really got his heart into it, and then you have all these super-spoiled kids with all kinds of money... But T.J. has met a lot of great people

in racing. He's a good, clean driver — always a favorite to win."

Fisher Jr.'s favorite track is Winchester Speedway. "I love the history behind it," he says, "and I like how Kyle Busch would come up and race there."

One of his favorite racing memories took place there as well: Winning the pole in his No. 81 over Busch's developmental drivers for the 44th running of the Winchester 400 in October 2015.

"It's kind of unbelievable right now," Fisher told speed51.com afterward. "Our race shop's on a gravel road out in the country. We pretty much built that car with our own shocks and everything. "To be on top of the pole ahead of Kyle Busch Motorsports is incredible. Anytime you beat all these guys, it's something."

A three-time winner driving No. 28 in the Late Model Sportsman division in 2016, Fisher Jr. started 2017 with a season-opening win at Lucas Oil Raceway in Clermont. He also won the Allstar Performance Fast Qualifier Award. Though he's since dropped to seventh in the points standings, the season is a long way from over.

The No. 81, his Super Series car, was scheduled for its first 2017 race in June. The rules for the tires and chassis on the two cars are different. The No. 28 typically races 50 laps, while the No. 81's races are 150-400 laps.

"Everybody always wants to shoot for

(Continued on Page 39)



Northern Wells Community Schools Superintendent Scott Mills has a weekend hobby — go-kart racing. He has participated in races in Indiana and Ohio. (Photo provided)

Weekends are a bit different for Northern Wells' Superintendent Scott Mills

By MATTHEW LeBLANC

Northern Wells Community Schools Superintendent Scott Mills is usually a buttoned-up type of guy.

He wears a suit to work. His office at the school district's administration building in Ossian is quiet and is decorated with IU and Purdue memorabilia and family photos.

On the weekends, though — oh, on the weekends — things are different.

Mills, the superintendent at Northern Wells since 2008, is also a racer. He spends his weekends driving a go-kart, racing against competitors at dirt tracks in Indiana and Ohio.

While most of his workdays are filled with computer screens, paperwork and administrative tasks, a day or two on the weekend features the roar of engines, spinning wheels and bumper-to-bumper racing action.

"It's just fun to get out sometimes and race with some people," Mills said.

Mills grew up around racing. His dad, Richard, was a Chrysler employee who owned a couple of race cars. They went to the race track in Kokomo when they lived there.

"I remember climbing in the cars and thinking one day I was going to be a race driver," he said.

Mills' grandfather owned a garage, too, and it served as a place where the future educator learned a little about automobile maintenance.

He raced quarter midget go-karts as a child. He and his father, who died in 2008 — "He never got to see me race go karts," Mills said — talked about finding something else to drive after outgrowing the small go-karts but, financially, it just never worked out.

Racing and competition never really left his thoughts, though. Mills said he would see commercials and attend events such as "the rumble," a go-kart race event in Fort Wayne, that would remind him.

Finally, in 2014, his racing career began anew. Mills found a go-kart on Craigslist, the online sell-or-swap website.

The kart needed a little work: a seat, some minor mechanical changes, a motor. But the skeleton of the vehicle was intact.

Mills hired a man in Churubusco to build the motor, and he set out in April 2015 for his first race, at Little Eldora Speedway in New Weston, Ohio. He was hooked.

Since that first outing, he's raced — and won — at more than four tracks in Ohio and a couple in Indiana, including nearby Baer Field.

He will tell you that he races to finish "in the money," but notes that it's mostly for fun. Mills admits he's older than many of the racers on the circuit, and he knows he likely won't be able to compete with the "elite" drivers.

Also, he says he won't be reckless when he's driving, and he's careful not to

(Continued on Page 39)

Jeff Kemper

(Continued from Page 19)

into it. They do the best with what they have and while you may not agree with them, I believe they are sincere in trying to do what they believe is best for the town."

He'd like to see some of the younger crowd in Ossian step up and run for council. "Their perspective on the parks and the school is going to be totally different than what someone 50 years old is going to be. I think you need that mix of youth and wisdom."

Keith Huffman

(Continued from Page 21)

Wisconsin, which has implemented a "Respecting Choices" program. With more than one-fourth of Medicare spending going to the last six months of patient lives, the program has saved more than \$20,000 on that state's average Medicare cost per death.

"It's not about rationing care," he emphasizes, "it's about providing rational care."

That advocacy led to some requests to speak to groups of seniors and then groups of estate planners, bankers, the state bar association and other professionals.

For example, in May Huffman was one of five presenters at the 2017 Estate Planning Day at the Monroe Convention Center in Bloomington, hosted by the Hoosier Hills Estate Planning Council. The presentation was "Planning for Health and Wealth in the Digital Age: Advanced Directives and Digital Assets."

In June, he was one of five speakers at Ball State University Foundation's Philanthropy Advisory Council's annual seminar. "What Elder Law Attorneys Do That Others Need to Know" was his topic there.

That seminar also included a presentation by another Bluffton-based lawyer. Michele Adler of Gordon and Associates spoke about "Long Term Care Planning."

He is a regular speaker at the Masters Series of Elder Law Attorneys, a volunteer group that gathers annually from around the state.

Since laws vary from state to state, Huffman's expertise has been tapped in Indiana. However, he would like to see more standardization.

Huffman has no idea how many he has done over the years, but estimates he makes about 20 presentations a year, with about "five or six of them major."

He served on the Ossian Revitalization Committee its first two years of existence. He's helped out at show choir at Norwell and sponsored local baseball teams.

Volunteering is important to him. "Too many people sit on the sidelines and let everyone else do it," Kemper said.

Ten years from now, Kemper sees himself still in Ossian. There's room for the store to grow and he would like to give someone else the opportunity he was afforded. Maybe to someone to whom life has thrown a curve ball — like it once did to him. ♦

The remainder are more informal — but no less informative — talks to church groups and retirement homes.

"I get to help people," he said. "I get up every day and I am excited to be able to do that."

He has no plans to retire, having recently turned 65. "I get calls every day from people who are dealing with difficult situations with their aging parent or another relative," he said. "We get to help them out. I love what I do."

And he is looking at the future. "We have the craziest health care system," he said. Technology will change not just health care but the way we live. He recommends a book: "The Truth About Your Future" by Ric Edelman.

The Powley Award was gratifying, he shared, because "it's a national award for advocacy" for the aged and disabled. Huffman was the first Hoosier to be given the honor. Other awards have included being the Member of the Year of the Indiana chapter of the NAELA.

His busy schedule has not precluded a heavy dose of other forms of advocacy and assistance in his community. When he accepted the Wells County Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year honor in 2003, he told the crowd at the annual dinner that he was being awarded "for going to meetings."

But there were a number of those. His work included key assistance in getting the Rivergreenway constructed as well as the Ossian park. He has served on the boards of the Wells County Foundation, United Way, Junior Achievement, Habitat for Humanity and others.

"You live in a small community," he shared, "I think it is something you need to do."

He continues to serve on the Bi-County Services Human Rights Commission and on the board of Family LifeCare, currently as vice-chairman. ♦

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Jump start

Preschool programs getting increased attention as students prepare to get the most out of kindergarten

By **MATTHEW LeBLANC**

Inside a classroom in an otherwise quiet hallway, preschool teacher Stephanie Hiday is smiling and laughing with her students.

Some of the children in the class are exploring sensory tables that contain sand and others are gathered with Hiday near the door to play a game involving music.

On the outside of the door inside Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School, a white board announces that children on this day are learning about dinosaurs and the letters "D" and "G."

Hiday, who has also taught kindergarten and first grade, said the mix of social and academic learning that goes on in the classroom will help those students as they transition to K-12 classes.

"It's very important to get them into a social setting — getting them to share," she said. "The big thing in early childhood education is the social element."

It's a notion that has been studied, and researchers say the lessons learned by students in preschool translate to better social and academic performance through school and beyond. Preschool itself is also getting more attention lately — in Wells County and across the state — as local educators seek to create high quality programs while Indiana lawmakers consider ways to fund early childhood education programs.

Early iterations of school-based child care/preschool programs in Wells County were so-called "latchkey" programs in which schools would take care of children before or after school, when their parents would then pick them up.

Since then, the latchkey efforts have morphed into full-scale education programs for children younger than five at BHES and Ossian and Lancaster Central elementary schools. Now, they and other preschool programs run by churches and the local YMCA are seeking certification through the state's Paths to Quality program that would designate them as high quality programs.

"Kindergarten can be a rough transition for some children," reads an informational slide for the programs at OES and Lancaster. "With students becoming familiar with the building and other students during their time at school, this should provide for a smooth transition into those first few weeks at kindergarten."

Just four pre-K programs in the county are rated by Paths to Quality, the state's rating system for child care and early childhood education programs. That number could soon rise, as two Wells County school districts — the Bluffton-Harrison Metropolitan School District and Northern Wells Community Schools, which operate the school-based programs — and two churches consider enrolling in the state program. Leaders of the Caylor-Nickel Foundation Family YMCA in Bluffton are working to raise its child care rating under the state program, an action that would make the facility eligible for grant funding.

Lawmakers have voted to expand Indiana's On My Way Pre-K program, though some specifics are still being worked out.

Local programs could receive funding for the state pre-K if they secure ratings of 3 or 4 in Paths to Quality.

In April, Hope Missionary Church and New Life Christian School each indicated they are working to enroll in Paths to Quality, a development lauded by advocates of preschool programs.

"Preschool is not just ABC's and 123's," said Pamela Beckford, who is a proponent of early childhood education and works as the executive director of the United Way of Wells County. "It is the social and emotional development. Being in the classroom with other children in a healthy atmosphere helps prepare children's brains for learning."

"Quality preschool means providing that healthy environment as well as a curriculum that will help children be prepared for kindergarten."

The pre-K program at BHES offers three- and five-day programs. OES and Lancaster offer two- or three-day programs. Both school districts offer morning or afternoon preschool classes.

Julie Meitzler, the principal at BHES, said preschool programs are "an investment" in a child's future.

"Anything we can do to prepare the children ... is going to help them be as successful as they can be," she said. "We're excited to do that for the community."

For Hiday, the preschool teacher at BHES, the benefits of a preschool education are visible. As a kindergarten teacher, she said it was obvious which children in her class had been enrolled in preschool.

Students who were in preschool programs knew how to share and they knew



Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School preschool teacher Stephanie Hiday sits with her class at the school. BHES is among other preschools in the area that have expanded in recent years. At right, a sign on Hiday's classroom door indicates what students are learning. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)

how to engage socially with their peers. They also had a head start academically, she said, learning things like shapes and

letters. "You could tell a difference, for sure," she said. ♦

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Ossian's T.J. Fisher

(Continued from Page 36)

NASCAR," Fisher Jr. said. "I'm getting a little old for that. But I enjoy what I do. I appreciate my dad getting me into it, and I appreciate the guys at Coe Motorsports letting me drive for them. It's good to know they believe in my driving."

Like him, teammates Scott and Austin Coe grew up with racing; both are third-generation drivers. Race-track announcers from Angola to Anderson have been saying the names Coe and Fisher for decades, though in the past they were opponents rather than teammates.

Raymond Fisher, who died last year, gave up racing around the time son Terry Sr. started in 1981. Around 1986, though, he got the bug again and built another car that he briefly raced.

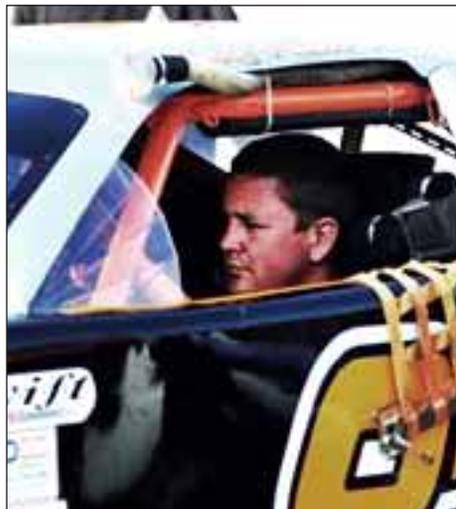
"I thought my mom was gonna brain us," Fisher Sr. said.

Raymond's father-in-law, Albert Sargent, raced at Anderson and the old dirt track at Montpelier in the 1950s. Judging from old photos he saw growing up, Fisher Sr. thinks he drove an old Model A, "maybe a 1932."

Fisher Sr. gave up racing in 2002 to focus on his son's efforts. "I'd been racing for another team and I was out of town every weekend," he said.

So who will future generations of Fishers say was the better driver between the two?

"I would say T.J. has got a lot better patience and better feet," Fisher Sr. says. "On these short tracks, it helps to have quick feet."



Terry Fisher Jr. had a deal with NASCAR's truck racing circuit in 2005, but a key sponsor pulled out at the last minute.

Father and son don't just build race cars together; they also work together at Brooks Construction.

"We get along real well," Fisher Sr. says.

"Our relationship has grown beyond the point of just being a father-son thing," Fisher Jr. says.

As much as T.J. likes working with his dad on the No. 81, sometimes it's nice to be on a team where he can "just strap in and go."

When it comes to racing, though, it's all good, says Fisher Jr. "I just enjoy what I do." ♦

Scott Mills' weekends

(Continued from Page 36)

take needless risks.

Still, things happen.

At a race last year, Mills crashed, breaking the gas pedal on his go-kart. The driver who hit him helped him fix it.

That shows the camaraderie and the community that comes with racing, Mills says. Racers are competitors, but many have also become friends.

"I do it by myself," Mills said from his office recently, referring to the fact he often takes his go-kart by himself to races, "but I don't do it by myself."

"There's always someone there to help. Many of my race friends are my Facebook friends. When you get to a race track, it becomes a social event."

For some, though, racing has had

other, even better, benefits.

At one race a couple of years ago, Northern Wells third-grader Jakeb Boxell was at a race when he and his parents noticed a driver who happened to be wearing a Norwell shirt. That driver: Scott Mills.

Since then, said Brandy Boxell, Jakeb's mother, Mills has become "a role model" for her son, both as a driver and as an educator.

Jakeb, now 11, started racing go-karts at age 4, his mother said, and wants to do it professionally someday. But Mills has helped remind the boy he must compete academically, too.

"(Mills) is building his relationship with him," Brandy Boxell said. "He helps. We've got a great group of racing family." ♦



Scott Mills

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Saving history

Markle residents work to preserve a log cabin that was likely home to town's first settler

By JESSICA BRICKER

A passionate group of people in Markle have come together to save a piece of the town's history.

A historic log cabin was discovered in 2016, just west of the Huntington/Wells county line, and it is believed to have been built by one of the town's first settlers, Albert Draper.

"What was always believed to have been the Draper family home was slated to be dismantled, removed, and sold to a private party in Ohio within a matter of days," reads a fact sheet distributed to the public in December 2016.

"When demo work began and siding was removed, Markle citizens realized that all of the stories were true. There was a log home under the layers of 'upgrades,' and this cabin could be the home of the first white settler in Rock Creek Township along the Wabash River in 1835. Just like life-long Markle residents had always said."

A group of volunteers, along with the Markle Historical Society, began a "grassroots" effort to save the structure and the salvage rights were purchased.

In January, Darrin Rubino — a professor specializing in botany and biology at Hanover College — came to Markle to conduct research and take wood samples to help determine the date that the home was constructed. As of late May, the Markle Historical Society was still awaiting word from Rubino, but when he was in town he gave a success rate of 80 percent in determining a date for the cabin.

But the work in Markle of Rubino and his research partner, landscape architecture professor Chris Baas of Ball State University, will help in their work across the state.

"You all are actually making a big contribution to the tree ring desert of

northeast Indiana," Rubino told the interested crowd gathered in the town hall in January. "We just don't have the data here."

Their research will help teach them how trees grew in this area; they don't have data on historic forests in this part of the state. Rubino believes some of the trees he noticed in the Markle cabin will date back to the late 1500s.

"This is the only way we can recreate the past so the oldest trees in Indiana are in your cabins and your barns and your churches," Rubino said. "So that's why I like to

go around and find all this. And there's a big cultural aspect too. It's important for place. It's important for history. So it adds a lot."

He added: "The way it turns out, we're able to really learn a lot about the history of Indiana doing a lot of this work."

On the Web

- View video of Darrin Rubino in action, as well as video of the interior and exterior of the structure, online: bit.ly/2qoBZE4 and bit.ly/2qo7Ftm



Darrin Rubino takes a sample of a beam in the historical cabin in Markle in January. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)



The cabin makes its way down Wilt Street in February. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

Baas says their work is limited to the summertime and then they had the nice weather in Markle.

"This was like it was meant for us to come up here," Rubino said. "This was perfect."

MHS co-chair Lisa Street said that is a common thought with this restoration project.

"That's kind of what we've said about several things with this," Street said. "Things have fallen into place, that it was meant to be."

A historian told Teresa Beck, Street's co-chair, "This house wants its story told."

Added Rubino: "And that's the cool thing because the story will come from how it's built and from the trees in it."

A week after Rubino was in town, the structure was moved down Wilt Street to Old Mill Park, which will serve as the cabin's final location. People lined the street to watch the move and participated in activities at the Town Hall.

However, the permitting for the foundation of the structure cannot yet begin as volunteers await the property deed from the federal government.

At the Markle Town Council's February meeting, it was announced that in the process of seeking the deed to the property near the Wabash River and Old Mill Park, it was discovered the federal government owns the land the town wants to own — and that dates back to when the federal government owned all of what is now Indiana.

Street said in May they are waiting to hear back from the federal government. This will allow them to get permits for the foundation. That process will begin the contractor's work and moving the cabin to its permanent location.

She also said that they've applied for grants and are awaiting notification on them.

In April, restoration specialist Steven Laliuff of the Indianapolis area came to Markle and saw the cabin. He is consulting them on restoration techniques and how to maintain the structure longterm. He's done work in colonial Williamsburg and Lewis and Clark structures in Illinois.

Historical Society volunteers are trying to consult with various experts across the country for long-term maintenance and preservation, Street said. They want to do the project correctly and make sure it

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According to the Markle Historical Society's Facebook page: "In the early 1900s, the Clingers owned the log home at 190 Draper St. Based on this photo's label we believe this is a picture of the Markle log home taken sometime between 1903 and 1920. If you look at the current exterior, on the side near the roof line, it looks like you can still see some of the siding that is all over the house in the old photo. How cool!" (Photo provided)

stands the test of time.

This includes replacing in the home's structure large white oak logs, which have been located, sawn and are expected to be transported from northwest Indiana to Markle through the help of volunteers.

In the meantime, fundraising efforts continue. Donations can be made online, via mail, or at the Markle Town Hall. Clerk-Treasurer Carolyn Hamilton said recently that those who donate in person at the town hall can receive a receipt for tax deduction purposes.

On Feb. 1, Street shared on social media that Huntington County Alert — "a historic preservation organization ... dedicated to public awareness of local preservation issues," according to its website — agreed to be the fiscal sponsor for the Markle Historical Society.

"This will open many doors for the

society to be able to apply for grants to help with the restoration of the log cabin," Street said at the time.

Beck added: "We couldn't do anything without them being the fiscal sponsor."

Donations may be sent to the Markle Historical Society, P.O. Box 197, Markle, IN 46770 and checks should be made out to Town of Markle-MAHS with a note in the memo line of the check specifying the money is "for the Markle Historical Society log home project."

Also donate online at: www.gofundme.com/savingmarklehistory

Those interested in becoming more involved in the Markle Historical Society, either through volunteering or input, are encouraged to attend the group's meetings on the second Mondays of the month at Markle Town Hall. Meetings begin at 7 p.m. ♦

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500 games

Rick Mettler, for 20 years Bluffton High School's girls' softball coach, calls it a career



Rick Mettler stands outside the Bluffton High School girls' softball facility. Mettler ended his coaching career in 2017 after exactly 500 games. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

By DAVE SCHULTZ

Bluffton High School has had a girls' softball team for 22 years. For 20 of those years, the coach has been Rick Mettler.

When the final out was recorded at the end of the Tigers' sectional game against Woodlan last month, it marked the end of Mettler's coaching career. It was his 500th game as the Tigers' coach, and it was almost all he wanted.

"It was a classic fast-pitch game, the score was 1-0 in nine innings. It was dominated by pitching and difficult to scratch out runs," he said. "That's what the game should be."

That's what it wasn't when he first became coach. A good team in fast-pitch softball has to have a good pitcher, and Mettler considers teaching that skill the hardest thing he's had to do.

"I've tried to coach kids in a lot of different techniques and avenues, and nothing compares to the difficulty of being a fast-pitch pitcher," he said. "So when we started out, we were hoping that we could win games 15-14. Not exactly what you would call vintage softball."

The reason Mettler has coached his last game, he said, has nothing to do with the change in his employment status. Next year, he'll be the principal at Bluffton-Harrison Middle School after serving as the school's assistant principal. It was not a condition of his employment that he give up coaching softball. Rather, it had to do with Ashlyn Mechling, Emily Miller, Zoey Pearson, and Aries Petty — the four seniors on this year's Bluffton girls' softball team.

"About five years ago, I made up my mind that this was the group I was going to go out with, this year's senior group," he said. "They are not my kids, but they will always be like daughters to me. Whether this principal opportunity came

up or not, this was going to be the last year."

That doesn't mean the cupboard is empty.

"We have a solid group of sophomores that are going to be juniors and a great junior player who's going to be a senior next year," he said. "I feel like it's the right time. There's ballplayers there for the next coach. I didn't want to be one of those who rode all the talent out and then leave."

When he took over as the Tigers' head coach, he realized that the girls' summer softball leagues — the program's feeder system — had to change as well. The girls had been playing slow-pitch; with the help of some parents, the transition was made to fast-pitch. It wasn't the smoothest transition, but it eventually paid off.

"The kids were great — they were anxious to learn," Mettler said. "We had a number of pitchers in the early years — and their moms and dads — that were eager to learn, and we eventually started to have more and more kids that had at least seen fast pitch."

With 500 games as a high school varsity head coach, Mettler has a lot of memories. ("My wife and daughters laugh at me because I can remember so many of them," he said.) There's one game that really stands out, however.

"It was probably the night we won the sectional," he said, referring to the 2000 season — his one and only sectional championship. "That was with those kids that were still learning to play fast-pitch. I will always remember when that game ended, I looked out into center field, we'd gotten the third out, and our center fielder was Jenny Minnich at the time — now Jenny Borrer. Jenny just sat down in center field and cried."

That was followed by a joyful bus ride home. "The jubilation on their faces," he said, smiling. "That one I remember like it was yesterday."

Mettler is a 1982 graduate of Bluffton High School. He attended Valparaiso University for two years where he played baseball, but that didn't work out for the long term. He returned to Bluffton, got a job working construction, and then life got complicated.

"You meet the love of your life (Jeanine), and then you're married, and you have a child, and life starts," he said. "I was working construction, not making much money, and my wife comes home one evening and said, 'Hey, I enrolled you in class.'"

He found himself working during the day and taking classes at Indiana-Purdue Fort Wayne at night. He eventually got to the point where he had only his education classes to take, and those were offered during the day. So he turned his schedule around, going to school during the day and picking up some contracting jobs in the evenings and weekends.

Then he got a teaching job. A longtime friend of the family, Fred Murray, was a teacher who was about to retire. He hung on one more year for Mettler to complete his education and be eligible to replace him. It worked. In 1998, Mettler began his teaching career as a seventh-grade social studies teacher at Bluffton-Harrison Middle School.

"Ron DeWitt was the athletic director, and he said, 'I want you to coach,'" Mettler recalled. It wasn't much of a stretch; Mettler had been what he calls a "lay coach" — one who wasn't a teacher at the school — for several years before he started his teaching career.

He went ahead and took extra classes in administration. Maybe he'd want to be

an athletic director someday.

Now, 25 years after graduating from high school, he's going to be the middle school's principal.

"If you had taken a poll of those Bluffton High School teachers that were still around, the one student they'd say was least likely to become a principal would have been me," he said with a laugh. "So I feel like I have a unique perspective." ♦



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Blessed to be a blessing

The Northern Wells Food Pantry is in its sixth year of feeding the hungry

By GLEN WERLING

A young woman walks in the doorway with a small child in tow. She needs food for her family.

But she gets a whole lot more.

The Northern Wells Food Pantry operates out of the back part of a building that once housed the Brew Ha in downtown Ossian. Seven Ossian churches provide manpower, spearheaded by co-chairs Rose Thiele and Phyllis Blake.

The sun is shining and a warm breeze is blowing through the open door of the pantry, which was the garage area of Paul Ealing Ford many years ago. Rick Park and Robert Blake sit in the back row of a cluster of metal folding chairs in the small entry room. Thiele and Blake are signing in a customer and Betty Maloney is about to lead the child and the woman, pushing a shopping cart, back into the larger side room.

"It's the economy really," Thiele says as she watches the three disappear beyond the threshold. "That's what bringing them here."

"A lot of people need it, but they're embarrassed to come," she adds.

"Older people need it too. They only get Social Security but they have medicine they have to buy. They can't afford medicine and food," Blake said.

The Pantry is open two times a month — the second Saturday and the fourth Tuesday.

"We started out that way. If someone needs it in between we take them through, but they can only go through once a month," said Blake.

The clock reads 11:10 a.m. The Pantry was supposed to close at 11. "We'll stay around until she gets what she needs," Thiele said. "We won't turn anyone away for being late."

Candidates for food distribution must meet certain income guidelines, though, Thiele emphasized. And when shopping, there are certain rules customers have to follow.

Placing her hand on a can of corn, Thiele gives an example. "If they are a family of five or under, they may have two cans of corn. If they have more than five members in their family, they may have more than two cans of corn," said Thiele. Similar rules apply to the other food items. Toiletries are also available.

The building is laid out in three sec-

tions. The people register in the front office, the shopping area is in the large room to the left, and there is a storage area behind a curtain where the volunteers make coffee and provide doughnuts.

"They like the fact that we take care of them," said Thiele.

The Pantry has been in operation since 2011, Thiele said. It started out at the Ossian Nazarene Church. "But it got to be so big, it wouldn't fit into the Nazarene Church anymore," said Thiele.

They moved to the 100 block of West LaFever Street in 2014.

Clientele fluctuates, but in April, the Pantry helped 26 families consisting of 65 individuals.

"And then, of course, we always see an increase during the holidays," said Thiele.

The board members try and stock the pantry with food they would like to eat. Food is donated by the member churches as well as churches and schools in the area. Food is also received from the Community Harvest Food Bank and the Wells County Food Bank.

"Some of it we buy with donations," said Thiele. They're always willing to accept cash donations. Ossian State Bank recently donated \$1,000 to the Pantry. The St. Aloysius Knights of Columbus did a food drive during Lent, challenging members to bring in 40 food items during the 40 days of the Lenten season.

The pantry has other goals planned.

"We would like to start a backpack program for the children during the summer time when they're out of school. We're trying to get it organized for this next year. There's a lot of things we would like to do," said Thiele.

They've also initiated some nutrition education programs through the Allen County Cooperative Extension Service and they would like to get Wells County's Extension Service involved as well.

"The people we serve are so happy we're here. They're very grateful and they give us hugs. We're not just giving out food, we're giving out our love and showing them we're here for them," said Thiele.

"They appreciate not being judged. You know, it could be any of us in that situation," said Blake.

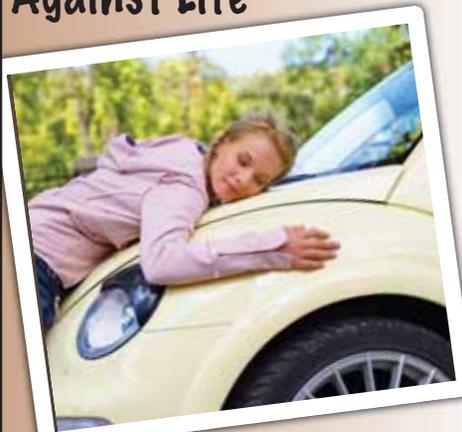
"And we really appreciate all that the community does for us. We're blessed," said Thiele. ♦



Giving without judging is important to Northern Wells Food Pantry co-chairs Rose Thiele, left, and Phyllis Blake. (Photo by Glen Werling)

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Friends Who Care live up to their name

By JUSTIN PEEPER

More than 36,000 new cases of cancer are expected to affect Hoosiers in 2017, and a group of Wells County friends want to make sure the community knows that help is available if the disease strikes your family.

The Friends Who Care Cancer Relief Foundation — formerly known as the Steve Kelly Cancer Relief Foundation — is in its seventh year of financially and spiritually supporting Wells County cancer patients and their families.

The Friends Who Care Cancer Relief Foundation donates money to anyone in Wells County who has cancer — cash those individuals and families can use for gas, groceries, wigs, a haircut or any other expense they incur that insurance might not cover.

There are no restrictions about how the families use the money that the not-for-profit foundation allocates.

The foundation has helped approximately 250 Wells County cancer patients and their families during the past seven years by donating some \$280,000.

All of the money the foundation has raised has come

from individual and business donations.

The foundation has also raised funds during benefit events such as a golf outing, a foundation day and a gospel concert and auction.

“We want to give a big thank you to Wells County residents and the businesses that help support the foundation because otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to help so many people,” said board member Larry Peeper.

All of the money the foundation raises stays in Wells County to support local residents.

The foundation’s eight-member board of directors — Jeff Adams, Cheryl Buckland, Brandie Cotton, Cindy Gordon, Andy Moser, Peeper, Todd Reimschisel and Bruce Stinson — reviews each request for assistance and then determines the amount each applicant receives.

Anyone who needs help should contact one of the board of directors or call 260-307-1074.

The foundation plans to keep supporting Wells County cancer patients. Board members stressed that any individ-

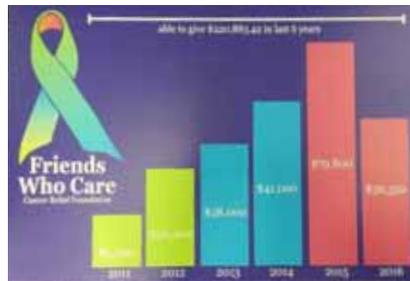


A large crowd filled the Wells Community Center in January for the Friends Who Care annual auction and fundraiser. (Photo provided)

ual or business can help.

“We would love to get more corporate sponsors,” Peeper said.

Any individual or business that would like to support the foundation’s mission should contact any of the board members or call 260-307-1074. ♦



BrickHouse Family Ministries puts the emphasis on families

By DAVE SCHULTZ

There have been changes and there will be changes at what is now known as BrickHouse Family Ministries.

The organization started out as House of Hope Northeast Indiana, part of a national network of ministries that reaches out to teen-aged boys. Last year, the decision was made to go beyond the boys to reach out to their families.

“The key to this program is if the atmosphere at home doesn’t change, then everything stays the same,” said Alicia Hill, the executive director at BrickHouse. “(The boys) are home every other weekend. Those expectations need to change.”

The tagline for BrickHouse is “restoring teens, rebuilding families.” An introductory brochure includes two quotes from the Bible: “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6) and “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain ...” (Psalms 127:1).

“What we’re trying to do here in Wells County and northeast Indiana is to be a light for the teens and their fami-

lies,” Hill said. “We’ve got teens from northeast Indiana to tell you: It’s not easy out there.”

The ministry is for boys 13 to 17 years of age, although some 18-year-olds still in high school may be eligible. The geographic limit is 100 miles of Bluffton. The average stay for a teen in the program is 12 to 18 months.

The program’s limits are five boys at a time and working with 10 to 12 families.

There is an after-care program that is being implemented as well. The goal is to be sure, once the boys leave the ministry, “that they use the tools they learn here,” Hill said.

“We don’t want the boys to go back to their old lifestyle,” she said. “We will stay with them as long as they need us.”

Because BrickHouse serves teens and families within a 100-mile radius of Bluffton, the ministry is searching for mentors. “We are always looking for those willing to mentor our young men and walk along with them,” she said.

The boys live on a farm northwest of Bluffton and the ministry’s headquarters is on South Main Street in Bluffton. ♦



Alicia Hill is shown with residents of BrickHouse Family Ministries outside the organization’s South Main Street campus. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

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Maintaining the 4-H Park: 'Enjoyable' work

By GLEN WERLING

Roush Park and Wilson Park are two of Bluffton's largest parks.

But even combined they don't attain to the size of the Wells County 4-H Park.

There are three people responsible for the care of the park.

Cathy Neu got started as a volunteer caretaker. "In 2005, they lost their caretaker who had done all of the groundwork before that. So I went to part-time so then they decided to pay me. I've been here ever since," Neu said.

She enjoys being outside. "I like to mow. That's a good thing, because there's 40 acres to mow," she said.

The grass had been growing for over a month on a cool windy day in May, but Neu admitted she still hadn't been able to mow all of the yard yet because of how wet it had been.

"I'm probably going to have to mow it twice — or bale it," she said laughing.

Mowing is a never-ending job for Neu. Unless the weather turns extremely dry, when she finishes mowing the whole park, she starts over again the next day.

She had some help this year from the Southern Wells FFA with some general cleanup from the ravages of winter. They picked up sticks and did some other chores around the park.

Then there's the 4-H group members who help out. The track team from Southern Wells helped her put down new weed guard and shovel in seven or eight loads of stone.

"The Master Gardeners members also take care of the main entrances," added Ron Myers, who lives on the grounds with his wife Yvonne as the other two caretakers.

"They plant flowers. Separately Pat Wall and B.J. Gray plant the flower pots," added Myers.

"I'm grateful for their assistance. If I had to get off the mower and pick up sticks all of the time, it would be a 30 to 40-hour-a-week job," added Neu.

The Myers also assist in groundskeeping. "But we also do all of the maintenance, from putting the gravel on the roads, to repairing lights that have gone bad, to sweeping and keeping the barns and the Quonset hut clean," said Myers.

"They're really good at cutting up trees," quipped Neu.

The Myers also do all of the marketing of the park.

"We do all of the rentals of the buildings and the grounds," Ron Myers said.

The 4-H Park hosts considerably more events than just 4-H events. There's wed-



Kathy Neu and Rex Myers, along with Myers' wife Yvonne, take care of the Wells County 4-H Park. (Photo by Glen Werling)

dings, there's conventions, there's meetings, and on this particular day in May, Myers was gearing up for the Senior Expo.

"We also have three garage sales going on this weekend in the Quonset," he added. "We have a camping club coming with 40 campers. As a matter of fact we're booked this coming weekend until November with one weekend off in August," Myers said.

"Last week we had a medieval event in here," he recalled. There was jousting in the show arena and the crowning of a new king and queen, recalled Myers.

"The park's use is very versatile," Neu added. She observed that even when events aren't going on, there are people picnicking in the park, or walking through it. "When the weather is nice, up through dusk, there's always someone here," said Myers. "People walk their dogs, kids practice baseball and baton twirling here," said Neu.

The 4-H Fair is another entity. "There's always something breaking during the 4-H Fair," said Myers. During the Fair, the Myers get help from Sheriff Monte Fisher and one of his employees.

Getting people into the park is a huge responsibility. Overnight camping in the park during the fair has grown in the past few years and has added to the Myers' responsibilities.

"Then as the fair progresses, there's always something that breaks," he said. Meeting the miscellaneous needs of the

groundswell of people to the park during the fair also adds to the Myers' responsibilities.

"Then Kathy and I have to finish putting the park back together so it's presentable for the rental business," he said

Before taking the job at the 4-H Park, Myers had never been a caretaker.

He worked in the copy equipment business for 33 years before being laid off three years after the sale of the company by his employer to a new company.

He then went to work for Fort Wayne Pools for seven years, but in 2009 he was downsized again during the Great Recession.

"Obviously nobody was buying high-priced pools at that time," he said.

At 59 years old at the time, it was difficult for Myers to find a job. His wife was working at Franklin Electric when the caretaker job became available. Then the marketing job opened up and they decided to do both together.

Not only they responsible for booking events, they're also involved with overseeing them. With wedding receptions, if alcohol is involved, they police it. "We make sure the security is here. We make sure that the alcohol consumptions starts when it's supposed to and stops when it's supposed to," he said.

He really enjoys booking the events. "I love working with people. I've worked with people all my life," he said.

If something is too much for him to repair, it's his responsibility to schedule a

company to come in and make repairs.

"That doesn't happen much, because he's pretty good at fixing things," added Neu.

Myers noted that the Community Center is 19 years old and a lot of the fixtures are starting to show their age and are wearing out. "Just about every week there's something that has to be replaced," he said.

His home phone rings directly to his cell phone and started buzzing like an electric razor during the interview. "His phone never stops ringing," Neu laughed.

"Wherever I'm at, I answer the phone and I carry the reservation book with me. Two weeks ago, Yvonne and I were in St. Martins and I was booking weddings. It's a job that you never really take a vacation. We leave, but I'm always available for marketing," said Myers. "When people want to book something, they want to book right now. If you don't talk with them, they'll go somewhere else."

Winter time is the slow season, but Myers also books winter storage for boats and recreation vehicles.

"Being semi-retired, you have to have something to do, and this job is a good job for that," Myers said.

"People think I could live in a hhouse for free and I can set up tables and chairs, but there's so much more to it," said Neu.

"But the nice thing about this job, is you're not punching a clock. As long as you can manage the work, you're free," said Myers.

"The freedom of time is great. I drive a school bus, too, so I'll work four or five hours between my times driving, but when school is out I can come in at 6 o'clock in the morning, or 6 o'clock at night, as long as I get the work done," said Neu.

Both agreed that they'll keep working as long as they can. "Overall, it's enjoyable," said Myers. ♦



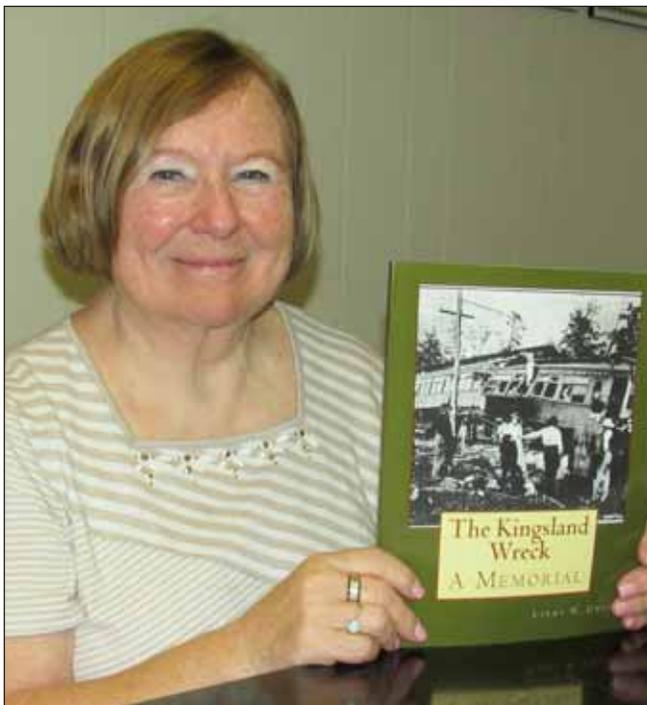
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Diane Owen holds a copy of a book that her late husband intended to be a memorial to the 41 victims of the Interurban wreck near Kingsland on Sept. 21, 1910. (Photo by Mark Miller)



Owen family enjoying renewed interest in Kingsland memorial

By MARK MILLER

He had hoped to have the book completed in time for the 100th anniversary of what had been called the “greatest calamity in the history of Bluffton.” He didn’t quite make it, but that did not deter Larry Owen’s commitment to create a memorial for the people who died in the Interurban wreck just north of Kingsland on Sept. 21, 1910.

A head-on collision of two Interurban cars going at full speed resulted in 41 deaths

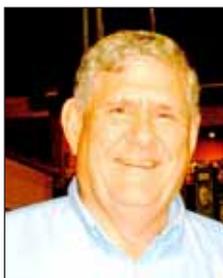
“Once he became more aware of the scope of the event, it always bothered Larry that there was no monument or memorial or marker,” his widow, Diane Owen says. “So this was his way of making a memorial.”

The result of those efforts, “The Kingsland Wreck, A Memorial,” received a mention in The News-Banner, and Owen made a presentation about his book and the history he had unearthed to a meeting of the Wells County Historical Society. That was in early 2012, less than six months after that 100-year anniversary.

The existence of the book and Owen’s efforts came back to light in the wake of his death earlier this year. It was on display during the calling and resulted in renewed interest.

Diane Owen appreciates that interest and enjoys recalling how he had focused so much on the project after his retirement as the Wells County Highway Engineer. She refers to it as “much more than a hobby.”

Larry Owen made numerous trips to libraries and cemeteries and spent countless hours tracking down information and pictures — not only about the 41 victims but the survivors as well. She did not accompany him unless it was part of another trip.



Larry Owen

“I remember one time on our way to our daughter’s home (in North Carolina), we drove through Chattanooga, Tenn., to get a picture of a tombstone,” she shares. “It was a huge cemetery. We had to get a map to find the right gravesite.”

Diane also accompanied Larry on some trips to find an old Interurban car that might be refurbished and put on display in the old highway garage, but there was never one found that had even a remote chance of being restored.

Many of the materials he obtained were old and faded. Much of the type was weak. “He spent hours using a special pen to color in the type,” she recalls. “Hours and hours and hours.”

The result, however, was well worth it,

(Continued on Page 49)

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Michael, left, and John Maddox of Wells County were awarded the 2016 River Friendly Award for land conservation efforts on the 500 acres they farm in southern Wells County. (Photo by Kayleen Reusser)



They're friendly to the river. Officially.

By KAYLEEN REUSSER

John Maddox believes in preservation of the land. He and son Michael farm 500 acres in southern Wells County which comprise the Maddox Family Limited Partnership Farms in the Salamonie River watershed.

Together, the father-son team practice several systems to safeguard and prevent soil erosion. Some of these include crop terraces, buffer strips, tiling, ditching, no-till/ conventional till, grass waterways, rock chutes and soil testing as nutrient management.

Due to their concentrated efforts, the Maddoxes were presented the 2016 River Friendly Award this past February. The award was given at the joint annual meeting in Bluffton of the Wells County Soil and Water Conservation District, Rock Creek Conservancy District, and the Wells County Purdue Cooperative Extension Service.

Each county soil and water conservation district in Indiana may nominate annually no more than two farmers who do an outstanding job of protecting rivers, lakes and streams through conservation management practices on their farms. The statewide initiative recognizes farmers who, through good production management practices, help keep Indiana rivers clean.

It is the first time the Maddoxes, who raise corn and soybeans, have won the award. To commemorate their recognition they were given a sign to post at a location

of their choosing on their farm.

Michael, who lives in northern Blackford County, which adjoins Wells, farms 80 acres there as well.

John Maddox has seen positive effects from their joint efforts at protecting the land. "I believe these conservation practices have greatly reduced erosion which increases soil health," he said. "Sedimentation leaving the farm has decreased greatly."

John Maddox has been a member of the Farm Bureau since 1961 and twice has been a recipient of the Monsanto Growers award. His family is also involved in 4-H and the USDA Conservation Reserve Program.

"My goal is to leave this ground better than when I got it and pass it on to my grandchildren," he said.

Family heritage is another reason that land preservation is important to Maddox. He grew up and still lives near the original plot of land his great-grandfather Foster Maddox purchased in the 1860s. The 182 acres that has been continuously farmed by the Maddox family earned them a Hoosier Homestead Award in 2016. Currently, a niece lives on the property with her family.

"I believe lots of farm families care about conservation efforts," said John. "If farmers want more information about how to implement conservation practices, they should ask questions and get involved with local conservation groups. The USDA can also provide expertise and knowledge." ♦

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Owen family

(Continued from Page 47)

she believes.

In his opening and closing comments in the book, Owen detailed how he came to be aware of the tragedy while working to obtain federal funds for the improvement of the county highway maintenance building. He discovered that the building had formerly been the railroad car maintenance building and storage barn for the Interurban. "The fact that such a momentous event as the Kingsland Wreck had no mass memorial remembering those affected was a surprise to me," he wrote.

The 114-page book contains some original writing as well of historical reprints of descriptions of the event and its aftermath, articles and photos from a variety of sources, copies of songs and poems written about the event, and drawings of the car in which most of the victims died both before and after the crash. Owen's efforts include a photograph of each victim and their tombstone and either their obituary or as much information as he could find.

Two of the victims were identified as homeless travelers — one only known to be "Mr. Gilbert" and another, Bennie Kramer, described to be an umbrella mender. Both were buried in the Wells



Each victim of the 1910 Kingsland disaster was given a full page of coverage in Larry Owen's "The Kingsland Wreck: A Memorial" to include portraits as available along with the victim's burial site.

County Infirmary Cemetery on the grounds of the county home with no markers.

There is also a chapter devoted to the survivors of the crash, but photographs of all of these were not available. One died in California, and Diane Owen chuckles at the prospect of Larry traveling there to get a photograph of her grave site. "But no, he did not do that," she says.

Bluffton resident Alan Daugherty, who also enjoys researching local history, was

given a signed copy of the book by Larry. "He deserves high praise," Daugherty says. He recounts that Larry and another person went searching for the exact site of the wreck. News accounts at the time reported that one of the cars was so badly damaged it was rolled off the tracks and burned on site. He believes that Larry and his friend found what they believed to be that spot, dug and found a thick layer of ashes.

"Larry's dream was to have one of those historical markers placed," Diane Owen recalls. It became apparent, however, that even placing a plaque along US 224 in Kingsland was almost impossible due to regulations and red tape.

The family has a box or two of the books remaining. They have no plans or desire at this point to sell them. However, books are available at Amazon.com, although Diane has no idea how they got there and who exactly is selling them.

Larry Owen created a website (www.kingslandwreck.com) and a Facebook page, both of which remain accessible. It will continue the memory of the tragedy, which was exactly what Larry Owen desired. It also continues a living memorial to her husband's efforts, which pleases Diane Owen. ♦

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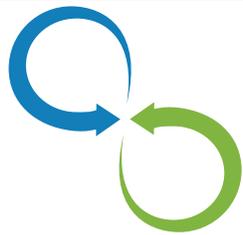
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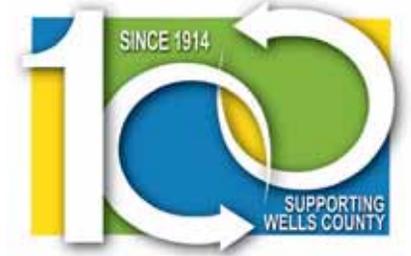
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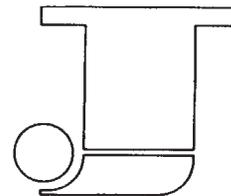
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Welcome to the local 'help desk'

During a time of new beginnings, Community Care of Wells County continues to help people in need

By **JESSICA BRICKER**

Through the highs and lows, each experience offers a chance to learn as they go at Community Care of Wells County.

"We've had some really good successes out here," said the agency's director, Kelley Householder. "We've had some spectacular failures."

Community Care is a non-profit that offers relief, rehabilitation and development for people. Householder said they come alongside someone in crisis and help financially, connecting them to resources and with redirection. They help them get back to where they were before they needed help, or even better with the use of mentoring and educational classes.

His motto, from his military background: "Set people up for success."

About five years ago, the Wells County Ministerial Association looked at the benevolence relief that the churches were providing. Some people — "system abusers," Householder called them — were taking advantage of the programs offered to help those in need in the community. Community Care, which is the umbrella agency for three programs, started out of that movement to review the aid process, and then it became a nonprofit aimed at helping people with difficulties in their daily lives.

Between Community Care and the Salvation Army office in Wells County, they provide between \$500 and \$600 a week for local residents.

"A lot of people are living paycheck to paycheck. They hit a speed bump in life, as I call them," Householder said. "The car breaks down. The hot water heater goes out. The fridge died, (or there is a) medical issue. Things like that occur."

"Now what?"

They offer financing classes, and have accountants and pharmacists as mentors. They are heavily faith-based, but won't turn anyone away.

He became the organization's first director in August 2016. There is a part-time manager at the thrift store and a part-time bookkeeper on staff, so the payroll is three. He said he is paid for 10 hours a week but clocks about 25 hours.

"It grows on you," he said.

Householder — who spent time in the military working in "computers, communications and intelligence support"

— said he likes fitting people in the right spots; square pegs in square holes, round pegs in round holes, he said.

"It's encouraging when you see some successes occur. It's discouraging when the failures occur," Householder said. "But the successes keep us doing what we're doing. You become passionate about it after awhile."



Kelley Householder

The organization was put together by people who are passionate about helping others. One of them, Todd Reimschisel, told Householder passion can only take them so far. They need a foundation.

He's working on putting in place policies, procedures and marketing.

"My wife summed it up well," Householder said. "They hired me and I'm jacking up the house trying to put a foundation under it now."

Connecting Center

The office at 116 S. Johnson St. is the office face of the organization. It's also been called the "help desk."

In 2016, they interviewed 335 people for help with \$92,528 in requests for relief assistance.

"Along with our strategic partnership with the Salvation Army, we met \$23,856 in relief requests, not including the references to additional appropriate agencies," the Connecting Center's fact sheet reads.

The building also provides a space for Kate's Kitchen, which serves between 225 and 250 meals each Wednesday to those who want and need them.

The Wells County Foundation gave them a grant for technology upgrades; they had been running on software from 1995.

They also received a \$2,000 grant from LiGHT, and at the time of this interview in the spring, between \$1,100 and \$1,200 had been distributed. They've been particular about who they distribute it to, since LiGHT aims to help women and children.

One of the women had her door kicked in and was abused. Community Care was able to put on a new door for her and a new security light to help her feel safe again.

Change Up Thrift Store

Located at 428 S. Oak St. on the south side of Life Community Church, the thrift store provides job training and employ-

ee evaluation for people living in the Community Care apartments without employment. The residents are sent there to volunteer.

"Somebody coming out of (prison) that's been sitting in a jail cell for six months or two years, they don't have stamina to go work at a factory job 40 hours a week. That's got to be built back up again."

People can donate to the store and get a tax write-off, or come in and buy nice items, and the money goes not only into the operating costs but into the organization's programming — such as helping someone keep his or her power on.

It's a win for all, Householder said.

He would like to improve tracking disaster relief and volunteer hours. They may also look into taking credit cards to pay for sales at the store.

The store is open from 1 to 6 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, and from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays.

Grace and Mercy Transitional Housing

What started as apartments above the Connecting Center on Johnson Street has now expanded to the former A Friend's House location at 1001 Clark Ave.

Householder said more than \$2,000 was recently spent remodeling the three apartments on Johnson Street.

It started as a program for men with the thinking that if they can get healthy, back on track and return to their families, the whole family benefits, Householder said.

After some setbacks and the apartments sat empty for five months, agency officials reevaluated the program. Within two weeks, they had four women living in the apartments.

Then A Friend's House closed, Householder said. Expanding to another building was a dream, and using a space like the old Wells Community Hospital was a "drool dream."

But they stepped inside the former AFH facility and drooled over that, too.



Community Care of Wells County Executive Director Kelley Householder, center, smiles as he prepares to cut the ribbon outside of Grace and Mercy Transitional Housing Friday. The facility's co-directors are pictured to Householder's left, Karen Dauterman and Cathy Teeters. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

Seven rooms can house women immediately, and the apartments on Johnson Street could be used for men again; they don't mix the two for safety reasons.

Women could use their housing after, for example, getting out of an abusive situation or after being released from prison. Life hit them hard, Householder said, and they were knocked down but are trying to get back on their feet.

"Rent" will be based on the ability to pay. The kitchen will be sued to teach residents cooking and nutritional skills, and there is space to hold meetings such as counseling sessions, addiction support groups, child development classes and other group or individual sessions and training.

The new location, an open house for which was held in June, will allow Community Care to help more people.

In 2015, a total of eight men, six women and 10 children were housed. In 2016, four men, five women and four children were housed out of the requests from 30 men, 30 women and 18 children.

So far in 2017, five women and three children have been housed of the requests from five men, 10 women and eight children.

"We want to restore dignity," he said. "We want to show grace and mercy, (and) help people change their lives and get transformed to what they want to be." ♦

'Excellence is a habit'

By JESSICA BRICKER

The saying on Sherri Thomas' business card is noteworthy: "Excellence is not a single act, but a habit."

Thomas is the vice president and merchandiser for Ingredient Exchange, which is located at 810 N. Clark St. in Markle — its home for three years after relocating from Decatur.

Thomas' father, Thomas Creque, founded the company in 1984. They are a merchandiser of feed ingredients for livestock farms. Thomas said it requires them to know the markets and prices to best meet their customers' needs at the best prices.

Ingredient Exchange has local business but also serves customers from Indiana, Ohio and Michigan. They will buy product from around the country as well. They also have a location in Perrysburg, Ohio.

Thomas started working in the company in 2004 in accounts payable and accounts receivable. She started learning the logistics and more about the company over time, she said, and Creque retired about two years ago.

Thomas said she learns something new each week in a business that is dependent on how the crops do.

"Every year is a different year. It keeps it interesting," she said with a laugh.

Relocating to Markle has allowed Thomas to get to know different businesses around town. It's also provided a chance to get involved with the Markle Chamber of Commerce and around the community.

It's helped her learn more about the town and she hopes to contribute to the community the company is in. She has a goal to "feed it forward" and make charitable contributions with a percentage of the company's profits.

She considers the company a small "mom and pop" shop, which allows them to develop relationships with their customers. Their niche, she said, is their customer service, which leads to customer loyalty as they compete with bigger companies.

What she likes about the business is getting to know the customers' families as well, she said. Many of the farmers they deal with are family-owned operations, as is Ingredient Exchange, so they get it, she said.

A farm girl at heart, Thomas said she loves meeting with their customers on their farms to see the end result of what



Sherri Thomas, vice president and merchandiser of The Ingredient Exchange, stands by a display of some of the products they work in at their Markle location. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

Ingredient Exchange does.

"It's personal," she said. "We do know our customers." ♦

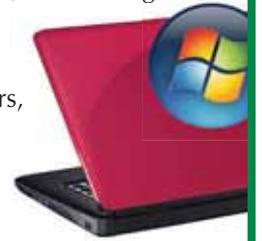
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To keep things running smoothly at the Wells County Public Library the department heads meet often with Director Sarah MacNeill, third from the right. Left to right are Jackie Daily, audio visual; Emily Marshall, community relations; Amy Greiner, children's services; Dawn Miller, administrative services; Vi Tester, reference; Leah Baumgartner, teen services; MacNeill, director; Teresa Dustman, circulation; and Susan Dailey, Ossian Branch manager. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri)

Library hears from its patrons and looks ahead to the future

By BARBARA BARBIERI

With Library Director Sarah MacNeill settling into her position and library patrons now more at home with the Word Wise way of shelving books, the Wells County Public Library continues to offer the patrons of Wells County outstanding service in both Bluffton and Ossian.

Community Conversations have just been completed, with all library patrons invited to attend one of three sessions that were held at Southern Wells, Bluffton and Ossian. Erin Prible from the Wells County Chamber of Commerce facilitated the conversations where those attending could offer suggestions on how library services could be improved. Director MacNeill explains that the suggestions will help formulate a strategic plan for the library's next five years.

Among the things expressed during the conversations were if a library branch could return to Southern Wells and if another coffee shop will occupy the space at the library's entrance.

For now, MacNeill explains, the coffee shop space will be available as the third library meeting room and be rentable.

The library continues to offer programming in cooperation with other area groups. The list includes:

- Bluffton Parks Department — Theatre Thursdays for senior citizens and Escape Room for

teens.

- Wells Community Theatre — murder mystery dinner theater.
- YMCA — Nerf obstacle course and "Y" at the library.

Bluffton Regional Medical Center's Senior Circle — Theatre Thursdays.

- Wells County Historical Society — recent Courthouse tour and Christmas programs.

In addition the library and the Historical Society have teamed up to digitize all of the society's genealogy materials. At this point it is about 10 percent completed, MacNeill explains. This will allow searchers to access the information online when the museum and library are closed.

A new service is "My Heritage" which will allow patrons to access the genealogy database by going to the Research tab on the WCPL home page. Select the "Genealogy and Local History" link and then scroll down to the MyHeritage Library Edition link. With a library card number it can access millions of records, photos and indexes from over 48 countries.

Among the continuing events is the One Book One County read when all county residents are encouraged to read the same book. This year the Bill Bryson book "A Walk in the Woods" has been selected and in the fall an author who writes nature books will be invited to come for a visit.

Another constant are the summer reading programs for both children and adults with the theme this year being "Build a Better World." Those participating and completing the reading challenge are guests at a celebration party in August with readers from birth to grade 6 and teens this year invited to a pool party at the Wells Community Pool.

There are many group activities and clubs for both adults, teens and children to attend during the year. The story hours are popular with the younger set.

A variety of special events and programs are planned for teens with an example being a service project that was held on June 20 that found the teens putting together snack packs for DCS and the Adams/Wells Crisis Center. A grant from the "Youth as Resources" group funded the supplies needed.

All ages were able to enjoy the drop-in musical program by the Musiclectics that was presented earlier in June — a sample of the "drop-in" entertainment offered throughout the year.

Those interested in knowing more can sign up to receive the library's email newsletter. To sign up go to the website (www.wellscolibrary.org) and scroll all the way to the bottom and in the right corner, fill out your email address in the "Library Newsletter" box and click on "Subscribe." ♦

DAR members have a reverence for the past

By PATTY ELWELL

"I have loved history since the fourth grade," said Anita Haddix, regent with the local Captain William Wells Chapter 4122IN of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.

The national organization has been around since 1890. The local group meets monthly at the Wells County Public Library at 1 p.m. on the third Saturday of the month (excluding July, December and January).

According to the organization's website, "Any woman 18 years or older may join the DAR by documenting her lineage to an ancestor, either male or female, who aided the cause of American independence through military, civil or patriotic service."

Vice Regent Esther Fry said, "The goal of the group is about the constitution, freedom and the love of history."

"It showed the freedom of religion, of politics, how we felt and getting out from Britain. And about not repeating history. If we don't learn about what has happened before we will repeat it again," said Esther.

Anita joined the DAR in 1966 by finding her Patriot ancestor Amariah Parker. "He was a wagon master in New Jersey at Morristown. He hauled stuff," she said.

"History intrigues me. There's a mystery to it and I want to find it out," added Anita.

Esther's Patriot ancestor was William Duesenbury. "He was a quarter master and dealt with purchasing of items for the unit," she said.

Esther joined in 1994 because "I love history and that is what DAR was about."

Steps to becoming a member include tracing your family lineage, identifying your Patriot ancestor, locating a DAR chapter and completing the application process.

National organization activities include restoring and maintaining historic sites; preserving historical records and artifacts; locating, restoring and marking Revolutionary War Patriot grave sites and headstones; supporting schools; awarding scholarships and recognizing outstanding students throughout the country; promoting education and citizenship through youth programs; sponsoring American history essay contests for students; volunteering to assist military veterans; supporting America's active-duty troops through a variety of programs, sponsoring special programs that promote the Constitution and welcoming new citizens at naturalization cer-

(Continued on next page)



Local DAR Regent Anita Haddix browses her own historical bookshelf at her home. (Photo by Patty Elwell)

'Journey bags' give foster children items to call their own

By JESSICA BRICKER

A local ministry is changing the lives of Wells County foster children one bag full of items at a time.

Five years ago, Jane Reinhard read "The One Factor" by Doug Sauder. The book stresses how one person can make a difference. She was inspired and began thinking about what her family could do in Wells County.

"We all have the power and ability to make a difference and to change the world," her husband Michael said.

"Journey bags" provide a bag full of age-appropriate items that the child can call their very own that they can take with them. The items include socks, a towel and washcloth, toys, personal hygiene products and a Bible.

Foster children often leave with their homes with few items, and usually those are in a garbage bag and the clothes are mismatched or don't fit. Going into foster care is traumatic and tough enough the way it is, Michael said; this eases the transition.

A year and a half ago, the Reinhards became foster parents so they see the community's need unfold in front of them. The journey bag program was the first step in cultivating the "fostering" portion of FAM (Foster care, Adoption, Mentoring) Ministries.

Angie Topp, who is part of the ministry with the Reinhards,

said the adoption part of what they do is their "niche." Her family has adopted two children and the Reinhards have adopted four children.

"There are a lot of hurting kids out there and multiple ways we can help," Michael said.

Currently, the bags are restricted to Wells County foster children but the organization would like to expand in Adams County as well since the two counties' Department of Child Services offices are so connected.

The bags are for ages newborn to 2, 3 to 6, and 7-10. Donation needs include toothbrushes and toothpaste, all-in-one body and hair wash, towels and washcloths, and socks for all ages.

Groups can also volunteer their time and labor to help load bags with items, and guidelines can be provided so the bag packing can be done at the volunteers' convenience and then delivered to the Wells County Department of

Child Services office.

Sometimes service or youth groups will fill the bags and it's a powerful experience, Michael said. People live in a bubble, he said, and don't know these needs are here in this community. They might see photos or read stories about children in underdeveloped countries across the globe, but there are needs locally as well.

"It's a good lesson for them," he said. ♦

To help out

- To donate items or labor, contact Angie and Chip Topp at 827-0461, or Michael and Jane Reinhard at 273-1595 or 417-2283. Michael can also be contacted via email at: mjreinhard@gmail.com



Michael Reinhard and Angie Topp hold items that make up a "journey bag," which will be given to a Wells County foster child. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

DAR - (Continued from prior page)
emonies.

Locally the group has focused on volunteer hours and student scholarships.

Esther volunteers at Bluffton Regional Medical Center; Anita helps out at Hope Missionary Church with the Samaritan Purse project; Registrar Connie Brubaker volunteers at the Wells County Historical Museum and member Meredith Fritz holds genealogy workshops and works with kids at the Wells County Public Library.

Anita added, "We offer scholarships for high school seniors, mostly in history."

In the past the group has also promoted essay contests.

At each meeting and after the administrative checklist has been gone through, members start talking about history and the people who have made up America's past. During the May meeting Secretary Alice Curry spoke about Abigail Adams and how she influenced America. "She believed in women's equal rights," said Curry.

Haddix welcomes new interest in the group. She can be reached at 260-341-7206 or via email at haddix@adamswells.com. ♦

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Meet your neighborhood robot

Robotics program draws in Ossian students and reinforces STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curriculum

By **MATTHEW LeBLANC**

They planned for a few, and dozens of students showed up.

That marked the beginning of a robotics program at Ossian Elementary School that's since become something of a movement.

The program grew out of efforts by teachers at OES to implement STEM education — science, engineering, technology and math — into the curriculum. After a trio of like-minded educators began working together and sharing ideas, they decided to seek funding and start the robotics program.

In the beginning, a handful of students were expected to sign up for the after-school activity. Instead, nearly 100 elementary school students' names filled sign-up sheets.

"It just seemed like it would be fun and interesting to explore," said 10-year-old Jensen Miller, an aspiring engineer.

He was not alone in that opinion.

On the first night, about 80 children showed up to learn about coding and designing and building robots.

"I just thought it was going to be a disaster," said Patty Atkins, laughing.

It wasn't a disaster, though, and Atkins and Chris Low — along with teacher Kellyn Atkins, Patty's daughter — were able to divide responsibilities to work closely with students as they read complicated directions and researched plans for their robots. In January, two teams of students from OES calling themselves the Cybears traveled to Franklin Elementary School in Logansport, where they put their engineering and coding know-how to work in competitions against schools across Indiana.

The Cybears finished in the top third in some categories, despite formation of the teams just weeks earlier.

"It's been a huge learning experience. I could not believe how far we went," Low said, speaking to Northern Wells Community Schools board members in March. They surpassed my wildest dreams."

Interest in robotics is high at OES, and it is on the upswing across the country.

A study from the New Media Consortium and the Consortium for School Networking said the number of robots, particularly in K-12 schools, is expected to rise over the next three years. By 2020, the market value of the robots could reach \$135 billion.

The Indiana Department of Education in 2013 set as a priority learning in STEM areas. Since then, many schools across the state have developed robotics teams, though a spokeswoman for IDOE said the department does not track exactly how many have them.

Work with robots can provide critical and computational thinking in children, according to educators. There are other advantages to having a robotics program, however.

Among them, students work together to problem solve. With so many children working together on similar projects, they also must learn to communicate effectively.

"The collaboration skills they've learned has been amazing," Kellyn Atkins said.

Fifth-grade teacher Chris Low worked with other members of the faculty to start a robotics program at Ossian Elementary School. Here, he is pictured with students learning about the wheeled robots used in competitions. (Photo by Matthew LeBlanc)



Veronica Hippensteele, the mother of Kaylee Hippensteele, a member of the robotics team, told school board members this year that the program has had even more far-reaching effects.

Kaylee has "come out of her shell a little bit," she said. "Her math grades went up a lot."

Robotics and STEM work at OES has involved students using iPads for design work on projects ranging from building bridges and gates to developing algorithms for ball-shaped robots called Spheros. At the competition in January, students drove wheeled robots around a tabletop course and moved pieces such as balls to specific positions.

Kellyn Atkins said all of the work will serve as building blocks.

"We now have kindergartners who can program," she said, "and when they get into third, fourth and fifth grades, they can take part in the (robotics) program."

In fact, robotics programs are set to begin soon at Norwell high and middle schools, though Northern Wells Superintendent Scott Mills said about a year will be spent developing a curriculum for the programs.

Area businesses have also bought into the OES program, literally. Roembke Manufacturing and Design, ABM, AdamsWells Internet-Telecom, Almco Steel, Edward Jones and others have all offered financial help for materials for the program.

For students, the robotics and STEM work has provided fun as well as a glimpse of what the future might hold for them.

Emmy Heaston, 11, said she's been helping her dad work on his car since she was 4 years old.

"I've just loved engineering," she said. "I just like building things."

Jensen, the aspiring engineer, said his work this year will help him in a variety of ways.

"It's an amazing opportunity, and you get to work on tests that will help you in your everyday life," he said. ♦



Emily Heaston works on a wheeled robot during a competition this year. She and other Ossian Elementary School students pioneered the robotics program this year. (Photo provided)

79% of Wells grads college bound in fall

By JUSTIN PEEPER

Four out of every five students who graduated from Wells County's three public high schools in 2017 plan to attend college this fall.

Sixty-three percent of the graduates indicated they would attend a four-year college, while 16 percent plan to study at a two-year college or enter a technical, trade or vocational education program.

The graduates' plans are almost identical to what their peers from the Classes of 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 said they would do after graduating from high school. In both 2013 and 2014, 77 percent of graduates planned to attend college while 78 percent of 2015 and 2016 graduates indicated they would attend.

The News-Banner spoke with guidance department officials at each public high school

in May and received information on 347 students from the Class of 2017. School officials cautioned, however, the numbers could change because students sometimes change their plans.

According to the data, 63 percent of this year's seniors plan to attend four-year schools while 16 percent say they will begin their degrees at two-year colleges or enter a technical, trade, associate, vocational or apprenticeship program — meaning that 79 percent of Wells graduates are planning to pursue an advanced degree this year.

Last year 360 students graduated from Wells County's three public high schools but 347 graduated this year. Fifty-eight percent of last year's graduates planned to study at a four-year school while 63 percent say they will this year.

Sixteen percent of this year's graduates —

Where are they going?

Listed below is a breakdown of what 2017 graduates of Wells County's three public high schools plan to do now that they have graduated.

	4-year college	2-year college*	Military	Work force**
Norwell: (171 students)	121 students 71 percent	21 students 12 percent	8 students 5 percent	21 students 12 percent
Bluffton: (106 students)	57 students 54 percent	18 students 17 percent	4 students 4 percent	27 students 25 percent
So. Wells (70 students)	42 students 60 percent	18 students 26 percent	2 students 3 percent	8 students 11 percent

* Includes 2- or 3-year colleges and technical, trade, associate, vocational education programs or apprenticeships.

** Includes some graduates who will fill their time doing something else or who were undecided.

Source: Wells County public high schools / The News-Banner

57 students — plan to attend a two-year school. Last year, 71 students — 20 percent — had plans to attend a two-year college or enter a technical, trade, associate, vocational or apprenticeship program.

Fourteen graduates, 4 percent, have plans to join the military this year. In 2016, 4 percent of graduates

also said they would join the military.

Approximately 56 graduates, or 16 percent, plan to enter the work force or fill their time with something else — almost the same as last year when 65 graduates (18 percent) said they would do the same. ♦

New energy infuses efforts, work of Markle Chamber

By JESSICA BRICKER

The mailing was all it took for a dedicated group of business representatives in Markle.

Last fall, Markle Library Branch Manager Nick Stephan received a letter from the Markle Area Chamber of Commerce. It posed an ominous question: Should the group continue to meet and function as a chamber of commerce?

After being put in charge of the new Markle library branch, Stephan thought it was important to go to the meeting.

There were about six or seven people there, he recalled, and they talked about the chamber and what they needed to do to move forward. It was agreed then that they wanted to take steps to grow it.

The chamber, they are sure, is important to the community.

"It was kind of an accident I was involved," said Stephan, who now heads up the chamber's marketing efforts.

At first the group began meeting at The Ingredient Exchange at 810 N. Clark St., just north of U.S. 224. That's how Sherri Thomas, the chamber's vice president, got involved as she is the vice president and a mer-

chandiser with The Ingredient Exchange.

As the group continues to grow, they usually meet at the library.

They haven't been idle since they decided to continue to exist.

Thomas said the chamber is rebuilding the focus to be not only about businesses but to also be more community-oriented and focus on the people and the town.

Members are putting together a brochure that lists membership information. They hope to do some work on the website, which has been a page on the town's site but they hope to make

a separate page.

Since last fall, they've digitized and updated their membership records. Their membership is 51 strong as of May, Stephan said.

"I would not have guessed there were 51 businesses in or around Markle to be put on the brochure," Stephan said.

Another project the group hopes to accomplish in the future is the installation of signs at major intersections in town to point people in the direction of certain businesses. It would be a project, Stephan said, that could help encourage the businesses in Markle.

Overall, Stephan is

encouraged by the group's efforts. About a dozen or more people attend each meeting, and they aren't the same people. He believes they are coming to feel the chamber out and learn how to get more involved.

"We suspect it will continue to go up," he said of attendance.

Stephan feels good about the experience the attendees have and hopes they are intrigued about the direction the chamber is headed.

"I feel good about where we are going and I think other people do too," Stephan said. ♦



Sherri Thomas

Online ...

- Visit the Markle Area Chamber of Commerce online at: markleindiana.com/welcome-to-markle-chamber/

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Schools refocus

(Continued from Page 4)

Efforts tied to job-based learning are starting even sooner, such as a programs in robotics and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) at Ossian Elementary School.

Educators and leaders of businesses say they're not trying to lessen the focus on securing a college education. For some students, a four-year degree is necessary, they said.

Instead, they say, career and technical education can help prepare students for openings in manufacturing and other industries.

Chad Kline, Wells County's economic development director, has said openings abound for skilled workers in fields such as welding. What businesses often lack, he said, are those skilled workers.

The skills translate to things other than employment, too.

For Jackson Ingle, 16, a Norwell student who helped with the press box, working with his hands rather than reading a book can help him in other ways.

"I'm learning skills (like) working on my house — when I get a house — so I don't have to pay people to do it," he said.

At a mid-May meeting of the Northern Wells Community Schools board, Eric Gardner settled in behind a podium at the school district's offices and began to tell board members a little about TI Automotive, the Ossian-based manufacturer of auto parts where he is the plant manager.

The business was established in 1994. TI Automotive has about 250 hourly employees. Since 2013, many new machines and new technology have been put in place.

Forty-five robots work in the plant, Gardner said.

The problem is, he said, there are few applicants with the experience and skills necessary to work with the robots. The business is always looking for applicants who can use the machines as well as program them and maintain them.

To that end, Gardner announced the donation of two robots that had been used at the plant to Northern Wells. The machines will be used to kickstart a first-of-its-kind robotics program at Norwell high and middle schools.

"This is a skill set, as an employer, that we do not see in our application process," Gardner said. "It's our hope that (students) having the opportunity, it will provide stimulation of interest into this field.

"We need to start now to invest in our future."

That's the key for Kline, the economic development director, too. By training

young people, students get experience, he said. By providing experience, doors are opened to job opportunities.

Job opportunities lead to productive, skilled workers for area manufacturers. Productive manufacturers lead to a healthy economy in Wells County.

"This is a need with many of our businesses in Wells County," Kline said.

For school board member Gene Donaghy, there is an added bonus: retention of Wells County students and workers.

"If they would be excited about robotics, electronics," he said, "then they stay here."

When Southern Wells announced early this year it would reboot a construction trades program that ended nearly a decade ago, district leaders said classes would teach students about building homes as well as provide new construction for the county.

A handful of buildings including a church parsonage in Liberty Center and a home on Ind. 218 were constructed in the earlier class. The new program, which will be hosted by Southern Wells, is aimed at doing the same.

"A class like this gets (students) into every phase of construction," said Kevin Keller, career and technical education director for Area 18 CTE.

Area 18 will make the program, which is unique in Wells County, available to students in Adams and Wells counties.

Chad Yencer, until recently the principal at Southern Wells High School, said homes will be built from the ground up, and property owners will work with students to construct homes. Work will involve everything from plumbing and drywall to framing and electrical.

"We just think it can be a great opportunity for kids," Yencer said in February.

The Adams-Wells Manufacturing Alliance is made up of businesses such as AT Ferrell in Bluffton, Hoosier Pattern in Decatur, and Roembke Manufacturing in Ossian. Its goals include getting area students interested in manufacturing and also getting those students working with area businesses.

One of its most significant moves toward that goal happened this year, when it partnered with AT Ferrell to place a Belmont High School senior at the business as an intern.

Lexy Counterman, a welder who plans to study welding at Ivy Tech Community College in the fall, worked at the facility much of the past year. There, she said she performed the same types of work perma-



Lexy Counterman, a senior at Belmont High School, worked as a welder through an internship program from the Adams-Wells Manufacturing Alliance at AT Ferrell in Bluffton. (Photos provided)

nent employees do.

In April, she was nearing the end of her stint at the plant, learning on the job to weld various projects assigned by AT Ferrell regulars.

"I'm learning way more now than when I was in class," Counterman said.

The AWMA hired Derek Vrablic as its career advocate last year, and he has said he views his work as a conduit between schools and area manufacturers. The internship program is one step toward fostering that alliance, he said.

Vrablic said in April his work has been challenging in that area schools have different ideas about how he can be used. But overall, he said, there is an

interest in getting students to work with businesses.

Steve Stuller, the president of AT Ferrell, said AWMA can be used to foster communication among schools, students and manufacturers.

"The communication (with schools) has been lost," he said.

That is changing, however, as Vrablic, Keller and others work with educators like Landrum and Kevin Powell, who runs the welding program at Bluffton High School.

"It is worth taking a risk on a student," said Kline, referring to businesses who might consider hiring students. "You can play a hand in developing that person." ♦

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