

2023

Who We Are

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INTRODUCTION

Three key components. And more.

Give me three pieces of information and I can tell you how good a community is. This has been a theory of mine for a long time.

How good are the schools.

How good are the parks.

How good is the library.

Wells County scores exceedingly well on all three points, in my humble opinion.

How good are our schools? They are outstanding. In the following pages we present a lot of evidence to back my theory up. We give you raw data that proves the excellence of our three school systems. The data alone should be enough however, there is much more to a quality school than just the numbers.

The students, teachers, staff, administration and school board play a critical role. The people are what make schools great.

We present stories about new programs, such as Southern Wells' upcoming preschool. Norwell athletes rallying around the loss of a fellow classmate. Historical athletic accomplishments at Southern Wells and Bluffton. Construction of a new middle school. Administrators and volunteers are bringing LifeWise Academy to all of our school systems. A teacher who found his passion while also maintaining a business. We can all be proud that the Indiana Teacher of the Year, Tara Cocanower, calls Wells County home.

We are blessed with outstanding parks in Wells County. The Bluffton Parks Department is among the best in the state. They prove it every year with the awards and grants they garner. We are also blessed with an outstanding state park. We may not agree on how to pronounce it (I am with the majority that pronounce it o-ba-chee), but we can all agree that it is a jewel of our community.

We highlight Wells County native and resident, Jody Heaston, who heads up volunteer efforts at state parks across Indiana. We also show the park's "Friends" group's effort to "Discover Ouabache" with an online publication.



Doug Brown
President
and Publisher

Our library system is also among the best in the state. As I was preparing to leave my previous job seven years ago, the library director at the Peabody Public Library in Columbia City encouraged me to meet the Wells County Public Library director Stephanie Davis as soon as possible as she was nearing retirement at the time. I took that advice and quickly learned how amazing our library is. Leadership matters. Stephanie was replaced shortly thereafter by current director Sarah MacNeill. The library has not only maintained those lofty levels but has pushed onward to new heights.

One of the "hidden gems" as described in Barbara Barbieri's story is the Indiana Room located in the upper level of the library and spearheaded by Jason Habegger.

Knowing many of the library's employees, including MacNeill and Habegger, and the programming and offerings, I am confident that our lives are greatly enhanced by the Wells County Public Library.

That may be a long-winded and over-simplified effort to praise our wonderful county. It is, however, undeniably true.

What we are striving toward with the 2023 Who We Are is a selection of people and programs that make this a uniquely amazing place to live, work and play.

People following their passions. Whether it is a long-time business, the arts, ministry or saving an iconic tree.

The Who We Are publication cycle comes around each year like clockwork. Each year a worry creeps in the back of my head. Maybe this year we'll have trouble coming up with story ideas. Like clockwork, my worry quickly fades. People in Wells County constantly amaze me. Because of the quality of this community there is an endless supply of greatness to promote.

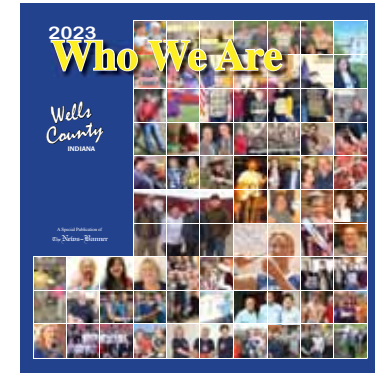
We are truly blessed.

There are wonderful stories in the pages that follow highlighting what makes Wells County great.

I hope you enjoy our selections. ♦

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BY THE NUMBERS

28,335

Population of Wells County,

12,043

Housing Units

\$66,102

Median Household Income (ranking 21st among the state's 92 counties, putting Wells County well above the state average.)

\$49,953

Per capita Income (ranking 50th)

\$140,200

Median Value

Owner-Occupied Homes

\$726

Median rent, monthly

93.2%

Adults with H.S. education (9th)

18.0%

with B.A. degree or higher (51st)

5,114

School enrollment

Population of
Incorporated Communities
in Wells County:

Bluffton 10,379

Ossian..... 3,359

Markle 1,080
(504 in Wells County)

Zanesville 585
(471 in Wells Co.)

Uniondale 272

Poneto..... 173

Vera Cruz..... 74

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Every Tuesday beginning in the spring semester, first and third grade students were led over from Ossian Elementary School to LifeWise Academy, located at a downtown Ossian building owned by the First Presbyterian Church. (Photo by Holly Gaskill)

LifeWise Academy expands into all three county school systems

By **HOLLY GASKILL**

LifeWise Academy is opening doors for religious instruction during public school hours.

The organization, based out of Ohio, advocates for the little-known religious instruction “release time” allowed in public schools. In the United States Supreme Court case *Zorach vs. Clauson*, the court decision enabled schools to include religious teaching during the school day, permitting the time is privately funded and off-campus.

All three Wells County school districts are participating with local start-ups of LifeWise Academy. Ossian Elementary School was the first of which to have a LifeWise class meet, offering its first class at the beginning of 2023.

At OES, the release time is about 25 minutes for both kindergarten and first grade on Tuesday afternoons. Students are dismissed during their “specials rotation” and led by a volunteer to First Presbyterian Church’s host building for LifeWise

Academy. Parental permission is required for participation.

By the end of the school year, Rhonda Maller, field director for Northern Wells’ LifeWise Academy, reported 80 kindergarten and first grade students were attending weekly at OES. Next fall, LifeWise Academy will be open for kindergarten through fifth grade students at both OES and Lancaster Central Elementary School.

The Northern Wells school board also approved selling two non-operational school buses to LifeWise Academy for \$1 each in May. These buses will aid in the organization’s transportation of students to their off-campus meeting spaces.

As a nationwide organization, LifeWise Academy leads local volunteers through the process of petitioning for release time, fundraising and leading the program. In its launch guide, LifeWise Academy also includes a unified scheme of colors, logos and resources for each

(Continued on Page 32)

Updating the vision for Wells County

By **DAVE SCHULTZ**

Once upon a time, Wells County’s comprehensive plan was expected to last 20 years. That was the case with the Wells County Comprehensive Plan adopted in 1993, which expired in 2013. Another one was adopted in 2014; it can still be found on the county’s website. That one was supposed to stick around for 10 years, until 2024.

Keeping that plan in place, however, simply wasn’t possible.

So it was that work on updating the plan began in 2021, a mere seven years after the adoption of its most immediate predecessor.

“Some of that was due to the fact that we knew it was going to take some time to get it done,” said Mike Lautzenheiser, the executive director of the Wells County Area Plan Commission. “We started with the plan that would replace it before it was done.”

“There were things coming on the horizon faster, like solar and some other stuff, that weren’t even mentioned in the previous plan,” Lautzenheiser continued. “It’s just how quickly those things came up during the last decade, even the last couple of years.”

A comprehensive plan is not a mandate. It is a guide, an expression of needs and intents, with the emphasis on the word “plan.” When a rezoning is requested or a development plan is reviewed, one of the significant items to be considered is whether or not it “pays reasonable regard to the comprehensive plan.”

What changed between 2014 and 2021?

Lautzenheiser mentioned, among other things, the “movement to reuse or redevelop the use of our rivers and trails,” he said in a recent conversation. “There has really been an uptick (in new situations) in the last five years, and those things were must in the previous plan. Those things are now front and center for us.”

The current plan, which was formally adopted earlier this year, redefines the term “comprehensive.” Its drafts were well over 100 pages and tried looking ahead. For instance, when it came to transportation, the plan originally attached significance to the fact that Bluffton is the only county seat contiguous to Fort Wayne that is not connected to the area’s regional hub by a four-lane highway. That provoked a dispute between those who saw the need for such a highway and those who saw it as a detriment to Ossian and to its residents and those who lived nearby.

Eventually the words were massaged and a compromise was reached.

The same thing was true when it comes to industrial-type solar farms. There’s guidance, but no mandate.

COVID-19 also threw a monkey wrench into the plans. The pandemic kept the APC from meeting and making progress on the plan. What started out as Vision 2030 eventually became known as Vision 2035.

The extra time has apparently paid off.

“I believe that it is as comprehensive of a plan that we’ve ever had in our community,” Lautzenheiser said. “It really is a bold plan for things that, if we complete them, we will be really moving our community forward, in a very meaningful way.”

The goal of the new plan, he said, was to make Wells County “more attractive for people who are already here and people who are potentially moving to it.”

Vision 2035 comes with a built-in expiration date. Does Lautzenheiser think it will last that long?

“If we get everything done that’s in the plan in 12 years, I’d be tickled pink,” he said. “But in general, there’s definitely things that we cannot be prepared for that are going to come up in the next 12 years. Whether it happens early enough that we can have an amendment to (the plan) or something else, it will definitely be part of a living document.” ♦



APC Director Mike Lautzenheiser, Jr.

Quartoseptennial



The Zanesville Lions Club has played a major role in the community's 175-year history. Chartered in 1956, the club built the community center adjacent to a ball diamond and park the club eventually came to oversee. Above are longtime member Melba Edwards and daughter, Robin Phillips, also a member.

Zanesville gearing up for 175th birthday

The Zanesville Lions Club is at the center of planning a big party for the small town that sits on the Wells-Allen County Line. The celebration will be held as part of what is now called the annual Zanesville Lions Summer Festival on Saturday, July 29.

Leonard S. Walker, along with his brother James, is said to have laid out the town on March 4, 1848 after coming to the area in 1846 with his new bride, Malinda Davis, and claimed 160 acres of wooded land. While many people get the small town confused with Zanesville, Ohio, it is widely believed that Walker chose the name since most people who settled there would have to use Ebenezer Zane's road.

Walker is the son of a Rev. John Walker of North Carolina, who arrived in Indiana in 1833 in Rush County. Rev. Walker would marry twice, with Leonard being the youngest child of his first wife. After founding Zanesville, Leonard Walker would move to a farm in Union Township just six years later and then to Fort Wayne in 1874 where he died Oct. 12, 1899, at the age of 79.

It is believed that the brother, James, was Zanesville's first merchant. It was Knight's Department Store that initially put Zanesville on the map. The large store's owners, the Knight brothers, traveled often to New York City to buy goods to bring back to Zanesville. Their home, just north of Tower Life Center, still stands. Records indicate that the store's profits in 1904 totaled \$24,000.

A fire in May 1939 destroyed the store along with neighboring Gaskill Grocery and a residence, leaving the north side of the downtown area in ruins. The Knight brothers would never rebuild. The store, once billed as "The largest inland department store in the

world" was gone forever.

Fire had also destroyed the south side of the downtown district in 1929, but the local Odd Fellows Lodge built a new building that still stands today.

The merchants organized in 1946 with a goal to make some major improvements to the town. They raised funds with basketball games and purchased a lifetime lease on 4 1/2 acres and built a softball field and park. It initially held a number of free shows during the summers.

The Zanesville Lions Club was chartered in 1956 and built a clubhouse adjacent to the park in 1960. The merchants asked the club in 1969 to take over all of the community projects, which they did and continue to do. The park is now called the Zanesville Lions Community Park.

Over the years the Lions have sponsored many things such as the Zanesville History Book in 1976 that sold over 1,000 copies. They have also constructed a pavilion, a new concession stand, two playgrounds, a fitness area and have fenced the area.

The Lions Free Library can be found at the clubhouse entrance, with more than 200 books to choose from. It is "open" at all times. The club also provides a number of community activities and events, including an Easter Egg Hunt, a 5/K Fun Run, a Community Picnic co-hosted by the Church of God, a Halloween Party and a Christmas Party with Santa. The club also provides the cash prizes for the annual Zanesville Lighting Contest.

The club is also active in the Lions state-level activities, supporting such projects the organization's eye bank, school for the blind, etc. ♦

— Information provided by Melba Edwards



Above left: Inside the community center, which doubles as the Zanesville Lions Club's clubhouse, is this banner which tells much of the club's history. "It needs updated," says member Melba Edwards, "including the 60-year sticker." The club has about 20 members, she reports, "and we will always welcome new members."

Right photo: Sitting on the county line has presented challenges for library services for the small community. The Lions Club solution: a "24/7" self service library at the front entrance of the community center on Van Horn Street. (Photos by Mark Miller)

Southern Wells' new pre-school program will serve dual purposes

By **HOLLY GASKILL**

It takes a village to raise a child, and Southern Wells is taking another step to help in that process.

This fall, Southern Wells will launch a new early childhood education program called Little Raiders. This program will both prepare students for kindergarten as an On My Way Pre-K program and offer a learning opportunity for high school students.

Kim Conner, SW high school principal, has spearheaded the preschool's formation. She will also remain as the preschool director as the program launches.

"We're so excited to have little kids in our school," said Conner. "We fully anticipate letting them participate in our activities and stuff, like pep rallies, dress-up days — things like that."

Class sessions will take place on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with a morning and afternoon block. During this time, Marcell Winters, a full-time licensed teacher, will lead the students through lessons and activities, and Jennifer Bannister will assist as an instructional aide. High school students will also help and observe in daily lessons.

The preschool's curriculum is linked to the Foundation to the Indiana Academic Standards for Your Children from Birth to Age 5.

"It supports our philosophy that each student comes into our school with different perspectives, interests, backgrounds, home lives, and life experiences," the

preschool application reads.

Additionally, on Tuesday and Thursday, Winters will work with the high school students on teaching methods, lesson plans and child development. This class will also be open for students from Bluffton and Norwell high schools.

The preschool will be hosted within the high school's previous family and consumer science room, which has been renovated to include a child's bathroom, observation room and a nearby playground.

The school has also received abundant community support in the preschool's start, receiving donated toys, classroom supplies and furniture. More needed items are posted through an Amazon WishList, available on the Southern Wells Little Raiders Facebook page.

"I've had this vision in my mind since August, and I'm really excited to see how it turns out and to get started," Conner said. "And we're really thankful for how excited everyone else is too."

Applications for both morning and afternoon sessions are open and available on the school website or at the high school office. The preschool costs \$80 monthly, with a \$25 registration fee and a one-time \$50 supply fee. Children must be three years old. Applications can be picked up at the high school office or by emailing Conner at kconner@swraiders.com. ♦



Kim Conner



News-Banner file photo



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Half-way there

Norwell's middle school project coming along

By GLEN WERLING

Progress on the construction of a new Norwell Middle School continues to roll as the building is now looking more like a school.

As of the end of May, crews continued demolishing the existing mechanical room, drywalling the front office, installing exterior brick and substrate, and roofing the building. They've also continued to put in non-load-bearing walls, and mechanical, electrical and plumbing components. The construction has continued to advance since that time to include block wall reinforcement, block walls in the existing school, completed roofing and installation of a partition track in the multi-purpose rooms.

The \$43,383,418 project actually had its start in the mid 2010s when the school board decided that the middle school would be the next major project to tackle once the debt from the Lancaster Elementary School building project was retired in 2020. The building, which dates from 1978, had been well maintained but was wearing out in multiple areas and the board found itself with the conundrum of whether or not to extensively remodel the current school, build a new school or a combination of the two.

Actually the school board originally considered four options for the school, but in a matter of a month had narrowed it down to two viable options since two of the options — updating only the mechanical systems, windows, roof and lighting, or a complete remodel of only the existing space — were considered not viable.

The first of the two remaining options was a combination of remodeling some of the existing school, demolition of most of



Above: Looking more and more like the school building it will eventually be, this aerial photo of the Norwell Middle School construction shows just how far along crews were in late May. The construction has advanced more since that time. (Photo provided). At right: Dylan Markley of Weigand Construction brought the school board and community members through a tour of the middle school construction site in late April. (Photo by Holly Gaskill)

the classroom portion, and construction of a new classroom portion southeast of the existing building. The new building would be connected to the existing cafeteria, central office and gymnasium which would remain connected to the Norwell High School complex.

The second option, labeled Option C, was to build an entirely new middle school separate from the high school.

The board members decided the first option would deliver the “most bang for the buck” as then-school board president Corey Krug put it.

Work on the project started in the fall of 2021 and the initial phases of construction were already underway when ground was broken for the project in April by the school board members and the principal people involved in the design and construction of the school.

The goal is to complete construction of the new classroom and office portion of the building by the beginning of the 2024-25 school year, and to have the entire project finished before the start of the 2025-26 school year.



The new building when completed will be 118,036 square feet. The first floor will be 64,968 square feet while the second floor will be 53,068 square feet.

The school project will also include the renovation of portions of the current school. There will be 41,454 square feet of the existing building renovated. The completed renovation project will include a new band and choir area, robotics and industrial arts shop space, a media center, complete renovation of the cafeteria into a cafetorium, additional classroom space, and a new drive and entrance to the school off U.S. 224. The new access drive was completed in 2022.

The project also caused the relocation of the Norwell complex's shop/maintenance structure. That was relocated to a new building and renovation of an existing building on the former residential

property adjacent to the east of the school project. That project was quite an undertaking in and of itself as it required the filling in of a large pond. ♦



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The name has changed, but theater is alive in Wells County, now as Creative Arts Theater

By BARBARA BARBIERI

Community theater in Wells County has been alive and well since 2000 when the "Save the Theater" drive was underway to save that portion of the old Bluffton High School.

The community came together for a theater fund-raiser as the Creative Arts Council, Chamber of Commerce, Boys & Girls Club, Wells County Foundation and United Way wondered if they could work together to use the entire old high school building.

The fund-raising production was "The Music Man," directed by Kim Durr and starred then-Mayor Ted Ellis as Harold Hill. And although the project did not raise enough money to purchase the theater facility it fueled the "acting bug" that has brought musicals and dramas to the stage ever since.

The old Bluffton High School property was purchased by the Life Community Church in 2001 and the stage was been made available to the actors who titled themselves Wells Community Theater. Funds from the WCT were used for stage updates, including lights, as well as parking lot improvements.

On the board of directors as theatre productions continued at one or two a year were Keith Huffman, Otto Lowe, Greg Merkle, Jim Phillabaum, Doug Durr and Ted Smith. In 2011, the group became part of Creative Arts, the WCT board dissolved, and Smith joined the Creative Arts Council Board.

The theater group's official name is now Creative Arts Theater as the Creative Arts Board oversees it and several venues, including Creative Arts Dance, no longer just the School of Ballet.

"It is the merging of these arts under one umbrella with the Creative Arts name that we can get groups to sample other types of art," explains Janiece Lipsy, Creative Arts Director.

The Creative Arts Theater also is doing more partnering with theater groups as they assisted with Bluffton High School's spring musical and will be doing the same for the coming Shakespeare production this fall.

Over the years there have been a wide variety of productions presented:

From 2000 to 2007, Kim Durr directed the productions which included: 2000, "Music Man" and "Little Shop of Horrors;" 2001, "Sound of Music" and "Annie;" 2002, "Oklahoma;" 2003,



Backdrops for Creative Arts Theater productions are now able to be painted in another area of the Life Community Church building, rather than on the stage itself. Ted Smith and Ainsley Werich were checking on the progress of the Emerald City backdrop for the upcoming production of "The Wizard of Oz," being painted by Wells County artist Nancy Wagner.

Want to buy a ticket to a theater production ahead of time? Here Tammy Ray, Director of Creative Services for the Creative Arts Council shows where the entrance to the CAC office is located, right beside the entrance door to the theater behind her.

(Photos by Barbara Barbieri)

"Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat," "The King and I," and "Fiddler on the Roof;" 2005, "Wizard of Oz;" 2006, "Oliver;" 2007, "High School Musical;" and 2009, "Godspell."

Over the next few years the productions and directors included: 2008, "Suessical," Dennis Wood; 2012, "Music Man Jr.," Linda Baller and Taylor Okey; 2013, "Guys & Dolls," Kia Miller; "Willy

Wonka Jr.," Melissa Terhune; 2014, "South Pacific" and "White Christmas," Sue Coolman; 2015, "Hello Dolly," Tank Lowe; "Greater Tuna," Marlyn Koons; "Into the Woods Jr.," Gavin Drew; 2016, "Lend Me A Tenor," Tank Lowe; "Kiss Me Kate," Gavin Drew; 2018, "The Last Five Years," Marlyn Koons; "Murder Cafe Noir" and "Odd Couple," Tank Low; "Honk Jr.," Alyssa Plisco; 2019,

"A Game's Afoot," "Steel Magnolias" and "A Charlie Brown Christmas," Tank Lowe; "Mary Poppins Jr.," Ted Smith; 2020, "The Mousetrap," Tank Lowe; 2021, "Lion King Jr.," Ted Smith; "Sorry Wrong Chimney" and "A Christmas Carol," Tank Lowe; 2022, "Beauty and Beast Jr.," Ted Smith; "It's A Wonderful Life," Joy Cash; 2023, "Wells County Sings," Joy Cash.



Storage space for Creative Arts Theater costumes no longer is a problem as the Life Community Church building has provided large rooms for both the theater's costumes and for the Creative Arts Dance costumes. Above, Ainsley Werich, at left, and Ted Smith were checking on props they might need for "Winnie the Pooh" and "The Wizard of Oz."

The space at the Life Community Church building has allowed the Creative Arts Theater to have ample space for the storing of props and costumes. Rehearsal sites and theater uses still need to be scheduled with the church.

Two productions are scheduled by Creative Arts Theater for this summer, offering acting experiences to youngsters in the community.

"The Wizard of Oz" featured students from ages 12 to 18 with performances on the weekend of June 16-17. Ted Smith directed. "Winnie the Pooh" will feature students ages 8 to 11 on the weekend of July 23-24. Ainsley Werich will direct.

And in the planning stages are "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" with Tank Lowe as director and the musical "White Christmas" with Joy Cash as director. ♦

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Who We Are

War weary are welcomed



Klint and Sarah Fiechter, center, stand in the governor's office in the Indiana Statehouse. The Fiechters were the first family in Wells County to sponsor and host a Ukrainian family. As of the beginning of June, eight Ukrainian families and three individuals have moved to Wells County. Pictured with the Fiechters are their children, from left, Emmitt, Otto and White. At the far right are Roman Tarasov, Viktoriia Serdiuk and Yaroslav Serdiuk. (Photo provided)

By CHET BAUMGARTNER

When Olga Laishevkin and her two sons fled their home in Ukraine, they left almost all behind — except for parts from one son's dismantled computer and its keyboard.

The refugees first lived in Latvia and another area of Ukraine for about nine months before flying to the United States — once again leaving behind everything that couldn't fit into one backpack and two suitcases for each family member.

Olga couldn't speak English, and she had depleted her savings while living as a refugee. And she had never personally met the Arnolds, the Bluffton family who welcomed her at the O'Hare International Airport baggage claim.

First, Laishevkin asked the Arnolds why they wanted to help her. And then she asked why they trusted her enough to invite her and her sons to live with them.

About three or four months earlier, though, the Arnolds' pastor, Steve Surbaugh, asked the Life Church congregation a question: Would they help Ukrainian refugees?

Bryce and Hannah Arnold first looked at each other.

Then, "We looked down, and all of our kids were looking at us, like, 'Yeah, we need to help,'" Hannah Arnold said.

Since July of 2022, the Arnolds and

nine other Wells County households have hosted or sponsored eight Ukrainian families and three Ukrainian individuals.

The Wells County families navigated the paperwork to bring the refugees to the United States and to help them financially and materially until they could sustain themselves. They also agreed to provide or find homes for them and to provide transportation and help their children enroll in the county's schools.

And they agreed to help the refugees — or "friends," as they call them — acclimate to a new culture that they now — and most likely from now on — call home.

"We are brothers and sisters in Christ," Hannah Arnold said. "We can be there for each other and understand the differences.

"In a sense, it looks like a big sacrifice, but it's been a bigger blessing."

— — —
Maksim Glotov holds up a plant.

The pastor speaks in rapid Russian (rapid, at least, to American ears), and he tells the congregation at the Foundations building on West Market Street to plant deep roots no matter where they live and bear fruit for God.

The crowd of about seven Ukrainians listen attentively during the church service, but the translation app struggles to keep up.

"Big spine ponytail and how to identify ripe watermelons," it sputters as Glotov continues preaching. "Dry ponytail should be dry twisted. And if it is big green, then this is the Earth, even if watermelon. Well, either the yellow tip should dry out."

The Ukrainians who speak English do better than the app, but like Laishevkin, most primarily or only spoke Russian or Ukrainian when they first arrived — though one child had memorized multiple movie quotes.

To communicate, the Arnolds and the Laishevkins spoke through their phones or typed their thoughts into a translation app, but even with those resources available, thoughts didn't always translate as intended. Once, for instance, Arnold told Laishevkin that she was "running" to the store, and Laishevkin assumed Arnold was literally running to the store.

"It was so exhausting to translate everything," Arnold said.

"It's quite exhausting to speak through a phone," Surbaugh said. "You kind of have to work to get that understanding."

The Ukrainians are working and learning, however, thanks in part to a series of English-language classes every Wednesday night at the Wells County Public Library's main branch.

They also learned as they spent time

together, particularly when they first arrived. The Arnolds and Laishevkins, for instance, often played Monopoly together.

While the Ukrainians are working to adopt the American language, they're more hesitant to adopt its cuisine. One couple, for instance, hesitates to drink water with ice because they assume the ice will cause colds.

"They graciously eat all my food, but they don't like any of it," Arnold said.

When Oleg Artiushenko came to live in Ossian, he packed some clothes, his prosthetic leg and food, particularly pepperoni — far superior to American pepperoni, he said.

Artiushenko lives with Arnold's son. Before that, he lived in Poland for about three months. For about seven months before that, he lived in the rehabilitation center that served homeless Ukrainians.

Artiushenko lived in his own home before that, but he worked at the center, providing material support along with the Gospel.

He said he hopes to one day start a similar ministry in America, but for now, he works at Perma-Column in Ossian and at a dairy farm on Saturdays and some Sundays.

Another Ukrainian operated his own business in Ukraine. Now he drives a fork lift during the night shift. A former history

Maksim Glotov uses a plant as an illustration during a Saturday church service for the Ukrainian refugees. Glotov planted churches as a pastor in Ukraine before he and his family moved to Wells County to escape the war. (Photo by Chet Baumgartner)



professor is working to earn her certified nursing assistant license. Glotov works at Meyer Building.

Overall, only about 10 percent of the refugees work in jobs similar to their previous vocations in Ukraine, said Chara Fennig, the volunteer coordinator for the Ukrainian Friends Ministry, an organization that helped coordinate the effort to support refugees in Wells, Jay and Adams counties.

“For a lot of people, it’s been a tough adjustment” she said.

But, she also said, “They’ve been willing to do what they need to do. I praise the group for being flexible.”

Bluffton resident Alyssa Aschliman tucked herself beneath a blanket one morning to begin her devotions when 7-year-old Bohdana stopped her.

Then she ran to her room upstairs and fetched her journal, “snuggled up to me” beneath the blanket, and opened her Bible storybook, Aschliman said.

Like other Wells County families, Aschliman and her husband, Blaine, are hosting families with children, but unlike the other families, they don’t have any children.

“I’ve had so much fun picking out girls’ bedspreads,” Aschliman.

“I like hearing their chatter. It sounds so cute. It’s been so neat to see them learn English and make friends at school.

“I’m kind of like a proud parent.”

The Aschlimans are hosting Glotov; his wife, Irina; Bohdana; and 4-year-old Ivanna.

They too agreed to host refugees when

their church asked for volunteers, but the Aschlimans didn’t think their 1,600 square-foot home would comfortably accommodate a family.

But then Blaine Aschliman heard about the Glotovs’ and their needs.

And Alyssa Aschliman saw the pictures of the girls.

And for about eight months, they sacrificed their upstairs to give the family a private place to stay. They opened their kitchen — telling the family to explore their cabinets and fridge and enjoy any food they find. Blaine Aschliman let someone — he doesn’t know who — wear his brown, fuzzy slippers.

They also needed more shelf space downstairs for the new toys they purchased (“Christmas was fun,” Alyssa Aschliman said) or that people have donated.

The Glotovs moved into their own apartment in the beginning of June, but the Aschlimans now realize they live in a bigger house than they thought, Blaine Aschliman said.

“We realize how much we really have comparatively, even though I can think we don’t have that much compared to other people,” he said.

And though the Aschlimans sometimes wished Bohdana and Ivanna wouldn’t lay on the couch and kick the living room window blinds, they don’t regret the decision to invite them in.

“Every once in a while I saw the girls running around and just having fun, and then I think about the kids who are still living in Ukraine ... and I’m so glad that

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In 45 years at Bi-County Services, Marsha Nicholas learned to expect the unexpected

Agency adapts to new requirements amid leadership changes

By TANYA CAYLOR

Bi-County Services grew from around 30 employees to more than 170 during Marsha Nicholas's 45 years at the agency serving adults with intellectual disabilities.

The longtime Human Resources director adapted to similar growth in government regulations. There was a lot to keep track of, so much so that the prospect of training someone to replace her proved daunting.

Yet when she reviewed her checklist with incoming HR Director Heather Baumgartner shortly before her scheduled retirement date, the notoriously efficient Nicholas discovered they were two weeks ahead of schedule.

It was a good thing, because her last two weeks of work never happened. A back injury landed her in the hospital and then a rehab center.

"It was really sad," Nicholas said of the way she closed out her career. But she was relieved that her untimely exit didn't leave the agency in dire straits.

"That part I felt good about," she said. "I did feel really good leaving it with Heather. She's very capable and knowledgeable."

BCS also saw longtime Program Director Joyce Bussard move into a semi-retirement role this spring after 30 years at the agency. Both changes were planned well in advance; new Program Director Erika Squires worked closely with Bussard as quality assurance manager and residential administrator.

"I feel confident of all the changes in leadership that have been put into place," said Bussard, who now serves as QAM in a part-time position. "Erika is terrific and will carry the torch for the consumers in new and different ways" as the agency begins a process of federally mandated community integration.

To remain in compliance, BCS closed its sheltered workshop in Bluffton as well as its pallet-making operation in Decatur. The agency now focuses on music therapy, life skills classes and job support. It also operates five group homes and assists consumers who live with family, housemates or independently in their own homes or apartments.



Marsha Nicholas, at right in left photo, trained her longtime assistant, Heather Baumgartner, left, to replace her when she retired as HR director at Bi-County Services after 45 ½ years. (Photo by Tanya Caylor) In right photo, longtime BCS Program Director Joyce Bussard, shown here with consumer Stanley Heckman, shifted into a semi-retirement role as part-time quality assurance manager this spring. (Photo provided)

A new regulation called the "Settings Rule" is forcing BCS to reinvent itself. But if there's one thing both Nicholas and Bussard learned during their many years in the intellectual disability field, it's that change is constant.

Learning to expect the unexpected

When Nicholas started in 1977, BCS — then known as the Adams-Wells Association for Retarded Citizens — was located in Vera Cruz. Newly married and working at McDonald's, the 19-year-old was looking for an office job.

"I was tired of coming home with grill burns on my arms and smelling like grease," she explained.

Though she had a desk and a typewriter and papers to file, Nicholas quickly discovered her "office job" was far from predictable. Sharing space with consumers working on educational and industrial activities meant frequent interruptions.

It wasn't long before the agency started its first group homes. Some days she found herself using a paint brush; other times she staffed houses that were short on help. At times it was frustrating, but there was a lot of fun and laughter, too.

"There are lots of memories, so many people I've seen come and go," she said.

One highlight was taking consumers on a trip to Memphis to see Elvis Presley's Graceland estate. The low points, inevitably, are when favorite consumers

pass on.

"I cried my eyes out when I went to Mattie Zook's funeral at her home," she recalls.

The backbone of the operation

Nicholas doesn't remember when she took over as HR director, only that it was before the agency's 1989 move to Bluffton, on its campus near Kroger that now includes Whicker Park and a brand new nine-hole disc golf course.

"When offered the position of Human Resources, I didn't even know what it meant," she confesses. "But I said 'Sure!'"

Nicholas is always surprised when she hears others describe Human Resources as dull work.

"I've always found it rewarding," she said. She sees HR as the backbone of the agency, which keeps the pieces in place that allows programming to occur.

There's also a bit of detective work involved. "In HR there

are always two sides to every story," she said. "The truth lies somewhere in between."

She's just grateful that the typing test she took at age 19 didn't disqualify her from what turned out to be a meaningful career. When she found it a while back going through papers to shred, she was stunned.

"It was horrendous," she laughs. "I remember looking at it and thinking it was horrible!"

Implementing the Settings Rule

Before COVID, 60 to 80 consumers arrived each week-day for classes at BCS.

Now daily attendance is 20 to 25.

The agency still serves more than 130 clients in Adams and Wells counties. But increasingly, staff work with them out in the community to meet the standards of the Settings Rule, which requires consumers to spend as much time as possible in settings that aren't limited to people with disabilities.

Even before the pandemic, Bussard was planning to dismantle the agency's elementary school-style model, in



After BCS closed its sheltered workshop in 2022 to comply with federal regulations, consumer Ashley Sargent found a job at Wendy's. (Photo by Tanya Caylor)



Rather than retiring, Larry Braun took a part-time position that allows him to take consumers on fishing trips and other fun activities. Consumer Josh Niblick, center, formerly worked at the BCS Decatur Workshop but now has a job at Lowe's. (Photo by Tanya Caylor)

which consumers spent most of their day in assigned classrooms when not engaged in music therapy, workshop or skills sessions.

That move proved controversial, especially among those who don't understand the Settings Rule that took effect in March 2023. But Bussard is not one to shy away from controversy. A criminal justice major who became hooked on the social justice aspects of the intellectual disabilities field after taking a second job to pay off credit card bills, she quickly became a fierce consumer advocate upon her arrival at BCS in 1992.

Closing the two workshops in 2022 upset even more people. But Bussard is thrilled that more consumers are now working community jobs than ever before, around 15 percent. And more are likely to enter the workforce if transportation difficulties can be resolved.

Meanwhile, those who participate in agency activities are doing so by choice,

taking classes that interest them, rather than attending what Bussard contends previously amounted to little more than adult daycare.

"We want what's best for our people," she said in 2021. "We're not looking to have people come in and sit in classrooms. A lot of that is crowd control, toiletting people and some of them sleeping because they're so bored."

Putting COVID in context

According to Nicholas, the difficulties presented by COVID and the Settings Rule are nothing compared to what the agency had to contend with in the mid-1980s, when it was learned the departing executive director had failed to keep up with payroll taxes.

The IRS bill was \$68,233.

"We didn't know if we were going to survive," she recalls.

Nicholas says it's not true that, as legend has it, staff worked for a time without

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Humble beginnings

Second generation expanding the Peña footprint

By **BOB CAYLOR**

Twenty years ago, Gil Peña and his sons Adam and Isaac lost their jobs when their employer went out of business. Using their three homes as collateral, they secured enough credit to start Peña's Mechanical Contractors in Ossian.

That beginning was modest. Their first shop was a 1,700-square-foot pole barn in Ossian. Their first office was five desks squeezed into Gil Peña's living room. For a time, his desk was the top of a barrel, Gil Peña remembers.

They've prospered since 2003 by building equipment to help customers improve their own businesses. Peña's Mechanical designs, fabricates and installs a huge range of structures and equipment inside industries of many kinds. Material-handling systems, from conveyor lines to bagging and shrink-wrapping machines to overhead cranes, are a major part of the business.

They also can make a manufacturing space more effective by building storage racks, stairways, raised platforms and more. Sometimes businesses hire them to repair, alter or reconfigure equipment. The company can handle the biggest modification of all — relocating an entire plant's operations to another site. All of this is only a small sample of what the company can do for its customers.

In the years since they set to work in

a crowded living room, they've expanded to a 24,000-square-foot facility on the north end of Ossian. They employ about 35 people. Most of their business has always come from the area. As Vice President Isaac Peña says, "If you can't do work for your neighbor, who can you do work for?" They began by building on local relationships with customers — some initiated when they worked for their previous employer. But as managers in those local businesses have transferred to other sites or found jobs with other companies, Peña's Mechanical has extended its reach.

Gil Peña, who retired in 2019, joins with President Adam Peña rattling off a list of distant locations where teams of Peña workers have tackled projects: Maryland, Phoenix, California, Toronto, Mexico City, among others. Adam Peña said that last year, more distant customers accounted for 20 to 25 percent of their work. That's about double the share of work the company typically does outside the immediate area.

As the company has cultivated more customers across a wider geographic range, Peña's Mechanical has also worked in more and more sectors of manufacturing. Adam and Isaac Peña take turns bouncing examples off one another: Food processing. Automotive. Ethanol plants. Medical equipment. Telecommunications.



Twenty years ago, Vice President Isaac Peña, left, and President Adam Peña, right, founded Peña's Mechanical Contractors with their father, Gil Peña, center, who retired in 2019. (Photo by Bob Caylor)

Steel mills. Feed mills. And more.

Gil Peña says he really has retired. He's happy to let his sons carry on the legacy.

"They do a good job. They do a better job than I did," the elder Peña said.

Gil Peña says his sons are more sophisticated managers. "My management was, 'Get the job done.'" His sons' command of detailed information helps them work even better with customers and employees alike.

"We learned it all from him," Isaac Peña said.

Adam Peña elaborated.

"We took those principles and maybe surrounded them with newer technology and different ways of communicating —

using 3-D CAD drawings instead of a napkin. We had so many drawings done on Subway napkins it's not even funny. But we've slowly progressed over time ..."

Gil Peña cut in, joking, "Now we use paper towels."

There's no joking involved when Gil Peña shares his pride in the continued success of the family business.

"The company runs the same way, with me or without me, with the standards of quality, management and customer base. I'm not in the picture, but it's still the same Peña's Mechanical Contractors. That's important. There will always have to be a Peña involved with Peña's Mechanical Contractors." ♦



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When Gil Peña and his sons founded Peña's Mechanical Contractors in 2003, the office staff worked out of Gil Peña's living room. This photo from that team is displayed in the 24,000-square-foot facility in Ossian where Peñas Mechanical Contractors now operates. (Photo provided)



An employee at Peña's Mechanical Contractors powdercoats a project. (Photo provided)

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Fire and feathers



The Herr family decided to rebuild after a devastating fire

By MARK MILLER

There are days, nights or moments in life that one never forgets. For the Herr family in Chester Township, that would be June 21, 2022.

"We had often joked that if this place catches fire, we may as well turn around and go back to bed," Bruce Herr said. "Of course, that didn't happen."

The family has been tending chickens since 1994. They started with 30,000 birds, and then expanded with a second barn in 2012 — another 30,000. The hens produce 50,000 eggs a day, all fertile eggs. Under contract with Hy-Line North America in Warren, where those eggs are delivered, the Herrs produce what is called "grandparent stock."

"We make the birds that make the eggs that you eat for breakfast," Twilla Herr explained.

It was, Bruce recalled without hesitation, 11:41 p.m. of a warm, summer night.

"We got a 'hi-temp' alarm," he said, which meant that it was at least a bit warmer in one of the barns than it should be. He remembers groaning. "Well, I better go check it out," he told his wife. But about halfway across the driveway from their home to the barn, he saw the glow. "Oh my gosh," he remembers thinking.

He had not bothered to grab his cell phone, so he had to hurry back to make the 911 call.

"But they were squirting water in 15 minutes," he continued. Chester Township fire chief Jody Nusbaumer was the first to arrive in the department's main truck, "and Adam Grover was right behind him."

"A couple of the firemen later told us that the call had gone out that it was a chicken coop fire," Twilla continued the narrative. "They said their first thought was that the fire would be out by the time they got there. But then they ran the address through their head and thought 'wait a minute, that's no chicken coop!'"

"Jody had called back in that 'This is an all-in,'" Bruce added. A total of eight fire departments would eventually

"We're pretty fortunate to live in Wells County."
— Twilla Herr

answer the call. "The Red Cross came out and provided water for the firemen," the story continued, "and the EMS came out just in case." Most of the crews were there until after 4 a.m.

The glow from the blaze, they later heard could be seen from at least 12 miles away. One of the Herrs' daughters lives east of Poneto. "They could see the flames from there," Twilla reported.

The barn was an all-steel structure — framework, siding and roof. Hence



Top: Firefighters from eight departments came out to battle the flames that could be seen as far as 12 miles away. (Photo by Dave Schultz) Above: Abe, Twilla, Bruce and Zane Herr with their new red barn in the background. (Photo by Mark Miller)

it was difficult for the firemen to get the water applied to the interior. Their main focus was to save the other, older barn just 75 feet to the west. Fortunately, what breeze there was that night was from out of the west. An excavator was brought in to demolish the "tunnel" — a building that connects the two barns — "so the fire couldn't creep over," son Zane Herr added.

Initially, fans that are meant to ventilate and keep fresh air in the barn interiors pulled the smoke from the burning barn into the original. That power was soon cut, which meant the 30,000 chickens in that building would likely get overheated.

"We didn't think they had survived the smoke," Bruce continued. "But the

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... and wine



While the June 2022 fire that destroyed one of two chicken egg-laying barns on Bruce and Twilla Herr's Chester Township farm presented a number of challenges, the family's budding winery didn't miss a beat.

"Dash-90 Wines" — the name comes from the address, 6750W-900S-90, Warren — had its beginnings about six or seven years ago when "we were mostly curious as to whether we could do it," Twilla Herr said.

In April 2017, they planted 500 vines. After putting the finishing touches last year on their new tasting room — a former sheep barn — the winery hosted several weekend "pop-up sales" that have now expanded to a much more regular schedule.

The tasting room is now open each and every Thursday and Friday from 3 to 8 p.m. as well as Saturdays from noon until 8. There are also special events, primarily announced on their Facebook page, such as the Valentines Day get-together that drew a near-full-house. There's also a regular euchre tournament on the second Saturday of each month.

The outdoor area has been enlarged to include an expanded patio and a handicap ramp has been added. Also new this year to add to the rural ambiance: a genuine restored corn crib that serves as a covered patio. Permanent restrooms have also been added for the 2023 season.

While local and area food trucks will often be on site, the winery is now partnering with Columbia City's The Kitchen & Co. to offer light snacks, wraps and "Grab-and-Go Grazers" — a down-on-the-farm term for what is elsewhere called a Charcuterie Board.

Dash-90 now has 16 wine varieties with two more to be added. "We have an apricot and a Pino Grigio in the works," says Twilla Herr. And they like to keep a farm-theme in what they name their varieties of dry, sweet and semi-sweet creations, such as "Golden Clucker," "White GOAT," "Rural Treasure," and two wines named after the nearby river: "Salamonie Sweet" and a dry "Salamonie White." Additionally, wine slushies have proven to be a customer favorite, so they now come up with a flavor-of-the-month.

There will also be entertainment during weekend hours with plans for special July 4 and Labor Day events. And then there is the annual Post Turkey Trot 5-K race to benefit the Southern Wells High School cross-country team.

"We're having fun," Twilla says.

— Mark Miller

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Being chosen as Indiana's teacher of the year included a reception at the White House in Washington, D.C.
(Photo provided)

Indiana's Teacher of the Year embracing unique opportunities

By JESSICA BRICKER

"I'm not the best teacher I know," Bluffton's Tara Cocanower says often. But some would debate that — just ask state education officials.

Cocanower's teaching style has been described as innovative, fun and inspiring. She's been known to take over the Bluffton High School commons area while teaching World History students about ancient Rome to race "chariots" — which are actually small robots called Spheros that students have outfitted like Roman race carts.

"Every time I walk into her classroom or every time I just walk by her classroom, it is so evident that she loves her students. She loves teaching," Bluffton High School Principal Steve Baker says.

She brings to life the subject matter and makes it relevant for her students, he adds.

"Seldomly have I seen a teacher with so much empathy and understanding for students," Baker says. "Her mission truly is that she wants to make a difference in the lives of her students and you can tell that with every lesson that she prepares."

Last fall, Cocanower was named a Top 10 finalist for Indiana Teacher of the Year after she was named the 2022 Bluffton-Harrison Metropolitan School District Educator of the Year. Then she made the Top 3. And in October, during a schoolwide convocation, it was announced she had been named the state's top teacher for 2023 with her colleagues and students cheering her on and her family members lined up on stage.

"Our district is very proud of Mrs. Cocanower and her accomplishments as a professional educator," BHMSD Superintendent Dr. Brad Yates said at the time. "Her daily impact on the lives of our students is beyond measure."

Since that October announcement, it's been a whirlwind for Cocanower, who has worked at BHMSD since 2014. She has had speaking engagements across Wells County, sharing her story of growing up here, leaving

for college and then to Romania to serve in the Peace Corps before deciding to come back to teach here.

And she's taken her mission and her passion for "world changers" beyond her community.

She spoke to the Indiana State Board of Education in February, talking about the importance of sharing the great things that happen inside Indiana classrooms every day. Dr. Katie Jenner, Indiana Secretary of Education, hosted Cocanower in Indianapolis for the SBOE meeting.

"For many educators, becoming a teacher is a calling to serve others and make a positive impact on the world, one student at a time, and Mrs. Tara Cocanower is the embodiment of someone who was truly meant to be a teacher," Jenner said in October. "When you see the way she connects with her students, it is clear to those around her that in addition to maximizing student learning, she is positively impacting lives and preparing her students to do the same. By believing in her students and being a trusted mentor, she is empowering the next generation of leaders and, as she calls them, 'world changers.'"

In January, she visited with teachers at Southern Wells Community Schools, sharing some of the tools she uses in the classroom and encouraging connection-building through supporting students and fellow educators. Over spring break, Cocanower visited Northwest Allen County Schools, speaking to administrators on teacher retention, school culture and how to empower staff.

She's met with aspiring teachers all over the state, including students at Tippecanoe School Corporation and the Trine University School of Education, as well as attendees at the Educators Rising conference in Muncie. She networked with and learned from her fellow 2023 teachers of the year from across the nation at Google headquarters in California.

She was named "Hero of the Game" for the Indianapolis Indians on Teacher Appreciation Night. And she

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Getting his 'teaching bug fixed'

(in an award-winning way)

By MARK MILLER

It may have been in high school, or maybe while attending the University of Northwestern Ohio. Kevin Morris is not sure exactly when and where he got “the teaching bug.”

After graduating from Norwell High School in 1984, he decided to get an associates degree in automotive and diesel technology at the Lima, Ohio-based school. He came back to his native Wells County and accepted a job at what was then Bob Bate Chevrolet in Ossian. With a few years of experience under his belt, he began some part-time teaching back in Lima.

“I really enjoyed that,” he says, “but...” He and his wife, Deb — they were high-school sweethearts — were starting a family. He was helping this grandfather farm. They had no desire to move to Ohio and the commute was “way too long,” he adds.

So instead, he started his own business, opening Precision Services in 1994 on Bluffton’s west side. Initially, it was just himself but he soon added another mechanic. And then another.

“At some point I was looking for a couple more,” he continues. “Which is one of the reasons I’m teaching. I want to get kids interested in this and involved.”

The teaching bug returned.

About 12 years ago, he became aware that Norwell’s automotive program was on a hiatus after a teacher’s resignation. “I knew they had that facility just sitting there so I went to the administration and told them if they wanted to fire it back up, I’d be interested.” The response was that “they’d love to but not right now,” he continues. He had enough workers at the time to accept a one-day-per-week instructor’s position at Ivy Tech in Fort Wayne. “I got my teaching bug fix,” he says.

About two years later, Norwell called with some news. They had an opportunity to apply for a grant to get some tools and get the program restarted. Would he be interested?

Morris took a couple of online classes through Ball State University which, along with his years of on-the-job experience qualified him for a “workplace specialist license” to teach in Indiana high schools.

At first, it was just one class per day. The next year, those students moved into a second level course and he added a new beginners’ class.

“So, two periods a day, come back to the shop, put a full day in here,” he continues. That went on for “oh, six or seven years. And then the administration called again.” There had been another teacher resignation; would he be interested in picking up an “Introduction to Transportation” class?



Kevin Morris’ dual roles: In top photo, he poses with his Auto-1 class for a picture that was used for the Chamber of Commerce dinner. At right, he is with wife Deb in the shop at Precision Services, an auto and truck repair business on Bluffton’s west side. (Top photo by Erin Prible; right photo by Mark Miller)

“It was an overview course — all things transportation, cars, trucks, boats, rockets,” he says. “Could I stay one more period each day? Well, my wife was very gracious. She said ‘you know, I think that’s what you should be doing so I will cover here.’”

She was right (“of course,” Morris adds with a smile.) He was one of just four educators in the entire state to receive an award of excellence for outstanding secondary and post-secondary career and technical education program of study in the spring of 2022.

Just as the new school year was about to begin this past fall, the administration called again. There had been a last-minute resignation this time. They were in a spot, but it would have put Morris into a classroom that he knew the students didn’t really want to be in. But a conversation had started. He wanted to help. The “bug” was still there.

“I told them that if they could get me credentialed, I could pick up the ‘Introduction to Construction’ class,” he continues. “I have some skills in that; I’ve re-habbed our house. They figured it out.”

So for the first semester of the 2022-23 school year, Kevin Morris was a full time teacher. Talk about a fix for a “bug.”

It was apparently another correct choice. Northern Wells Community School Superintendent Mike Springer nominated Morris as the 2023 district Educator of the Year. He was among the three county honorees at the annual Chamber of Commerce dinner in February.

“We’ve built an automotive program with the help of the administration and various community members,” he told a school assembly that gave him a standing ovation when the announcement was made in December. “While I do appreciate this, this is a team effort.”

That is one of the main reasons Springer nominated Morris, adding that his “great communication with parents and students daily” and his “enthusiasm and positive



attitude (that) have such an impact.”

The administration found another teacher for that constructions course for the second semester of the past school year, allowing Morris to cut back a bit in his teaching duties. “I was a 6/7th teacher,” he quips. That has allowed him to spend a bit more time in the shop although he quickly adds his wife is handling that end of their deal very well.

“I guess I just like helping people,” he explains. “When I started the business, one of the reasons was that I wanted to help people with their vehicles — help them get back on the road.” He found much satisfaction in that, as he does with his interactions with the students. He has heard from former students that it was often more about the life lessons — “like the simple process of getting your car licensed and registered,” he says — that they appreciated.

“I’ve got a really good crew here,” he adds, referring to his wife and employees at their business at 520 Decker Drive. And that will allow him to see where his “teaching bug” takes him next. ♦



Photo provided

Naturally, Jody Heaston is a naturalist (on a state level)

By BARBARA BARBIERI

Indiana is blessed with a wonderful assortment of state parks scattered geographically around the state so that most residents are less than an hour from one.

In addition to paid staff at each of the Department of Natural Resources properties, many of them have dedicated volunteers who also assist with park programs and belong to “Friends” groups.

Since 2009, Jody Heaston, a Norwell High School and Purdue University graduate, has been the volunteer coordinator and Indiana Master Naturalist coordinator for the entire state.

Consequently, she has an both office here at Ouabache State Park and in Indianapolis. Before accepting that position she was the naturalist at Mounds State Park in Anderson and prior to that a seasonal naturalist at Salamonie Lake and Ouabache State Park.

As coordinator of volunteers she connects individuals and groups who use their time, talents and resources to help with projects at the parks. The local Friends of Ouabache State Park is one such group. Another part of her job is doing background checks on park volunteers.

Her duties also include the planning of statewide “Friends” conferences held yearly with one year being a large gathering and the next year two smaller gatherings at different sites in the state. In 2025, Ouabache is scheduled to host one of the

smaller gatherings.

Another part of her job includes overseeing the campground host program at the campgrounds around the state. At Ouabache there are two hosts who welcome campers and answer site questions from other campers.

Another part of her job is to coordinate the statewide Indiana Master Naturalist program that is similar to the Master Gardeners program, only its focus is on teaching about Indiana’s natural resources. In that role she oversees the IMN classes around the state, certifies that they went through the program and continues to offer advanced IMN environmental education. To date, over 5,000 people have taken the IMN program and currently a group of 20 are completing the course at Ouabache under Heaston’s teaching. She often is the presenter for programs on bees and wild flowers.

When asked about a memorable experience, Heaston relates that during the summer of 2020 she was able to coordinate a large volunteer group of 20 people called “A Year to Volunteer” who worked at Versailles State Park in southern Indiana. This group travels the country in their recreational vehicles and volunteer at parks that need big projects done but don’t have enough paid staff to complete the project. Over a three week period, this group was able to build a 110-foot over-

(Continued on Page 39)

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Gene Donaghy saves a tree

Photo by Glen Werling

Practicality, not emotion, preserves massive oak

By GLEN WERLING

Rural Ossian resident Gene Donaghy saw what was about to happen and he was determined to stop it.

Indiana Michigan Power was moving its 12-kilovolt distribution line from the east side of the Norfolk Southern Railroad tracks starting at Yoder Road and continuing southward through Ossian to Wells County Road 700 North. It will eventually join up with an existing distribution line just south of U.S. 224 on the east side of Ind. 1.

“The new, stronger lines and poles are designed to strengthen the (electrical) equipment’s resilience against power outages,” I&M Spokesman Tracy Warner explained, “but if outages occur — or maintenance is needed — crews will be able to access the lines and poles much more quickly to restore power.”

Accessing the existing line along the railroad tracks was difficult because while there is a right of way alongside the tracks, there is no road. It’s just a rugged, grassy pathway.

Donaghy wasn’t against the line installation. He worked for I&M for 18 and half years and for REMC 20 years. He understood the need for the line to be moved.

But squarely in the path of where the new line is to go is a massive bur oak tree that Donaghy had admired from his youth — and that probably has been there from Donaghy’s great-great-grandfather’s youth.

The tree has a trunk five feet in diameter and 18 feet in circumference. It towers some 80 feet over Ind. 1 and has a spread nearly as wide, or would be nearly as wide if its east side wasn’t cut back from extending out over Ind. 1.

Donaghy also understood why I&M officials believed the tree needed to be removed. It was in the way.

But with his knowledge of how power lines work, Donaghy wrote to I&M officials that it would make more sense to bypass the tree rather than cut it down. His argument to I&M wasn’t couched in words of appreciation for history or intended to appeal to the emotions. His argument was from an economic perspective: The tree’s size would make it extremely expensive to remove, Donaghy reasoned, adding that bypassing the line to the east of the tree would be cheaper.

He got no argument from I&M officials. They agreed and on Valentine’s Day, Brian Recker, project outreach specialist for I&M, contacted Donaghy by email and stated, “I wanted to follow up with you after speaking with our distribution team. They informed me that they are planning to be on the east side of SR-1 at that small section to avoid the large oak tree on the west side of the road. We do not have any plans to remove the oak tree. Afterwards, they plan to primarily be on the west side of the road.”

A red-painted “X” is at the bottom of the tree, but apparently the “X” wasn’t put there by the tree crew working with I&M, Recker stated.

As of late May, progress on the line was making its way slowly but steadily to the south through Ossian with the line having been completed from Yoder Road through Ossian. The tree still stands and the tree removal crew is long gone.

And an icon from Wells County’s past still casts its shadow across the highway as a reminder that it will be here for many years to come. ♦



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A friend's memory helped propel Norwell swimmers to state finals

Winning a sectional in any sport, and then qualifying for the state finals will create a special bond among those involved. But for the seniors on the 2022-23 Norwell High School boys' swim team, it is a bit more special.

In fact, the entire Norwell senior class had gone through its ups and downs.

Toward the end of the summer of 2018, heading into the class's eighth-grade year, classmate Gabe Norris tragically died in a farming accident. Norris was a wrestler and ran cross country and track, and even swam for a short period of time.

Most importantly, though, he was a friend to most of the senior class, particularly several of the athletes.

"I was pretty close with him," Emerson Graft admitted. "I was friends with him ever since kindergarten. It was pretty tough losing him. He was kind of like my first best friend I ever had. He was a good friend, and losing someone that you've known for what feels like your whole life is something hard."

"I was pretty good friends with him, too," Sam Peterson said. "Losing him was a pretty big struggle my eighth-grade year, but ultimately that loss definitely shaped who I am today and many other people."

"We all hung out in that core group, and so losing him was really tough on all of us," Mikey Reidenbach III said.

Norris's legacy continues. Peterson said there's an honor that bears his name at the middle school called the "Gabe Norris Award" and his family has set up a scholarship under his name.

On wrestling Senior Night, the crowd was a sea of green shirts honoring Norris, and his parents were there and received flowers from the members of the wrestling team's seniors.

On the cross-country course, a tree was planted to remember him. The boys took photos in front of the tree before their formal dance.

The group of seniors that led the swim team to the sectional and Northeast 8 Conference crown is particularly unique. The six — Reidenbach, Peterson, Graft, Reece Lobsiger, Marin Melcher, and Thomas Garza — are a tight-knit group. The bond they share is part of the reason for what they've been able to accomplish this year.

"We've just been friends for a while," Peterson said of his teammates, who mostly have been swimming together since elementary school. "Swimming together for an hour and a half a day for how many weeks? — 16 weeks," Peterson said. "Any friendship spending that much time together is going to prosper. We're just such good friends."

The group gets together on the anniversary of their friend's death and visits the gravesite at Sparks Cemetery and writes chalk messages on a platform near his gravesite.

The boys still keep him on their minds. Graft keeps a wristband in his sports bag from the hospital when they would go visit him.

Peterson finds himself remembering him more when he's running.

"Yeah, he was a swimmer, but when I run especially, I think of him when I run cross country and track. That was some of his main sports besides wrestling," he said. "Those are what I think of when I run."

Nearly five years after the tragedy, the group has learned to cope with the sadness and has seen a brighter light in all of it.

"When he first died, it was definitely hard, and it still is, but I think what's come out of it, we've become a lot closer through the tragedy of his death," Graft said. "Now, it's not so much something sad. It's something that unites us because we've all been through it at the same time. We all felt the pain that the other felt. I think now, it's much more of a uniting force than it is like a saddening one."

"I think he'd really like to see all of us continue our group, especially in honor of him," Reidenbach said.

"When I think about it, it's sad, but I think about all of the good it's done in the people I've talked to, like the Gabe Norris award for the middle school and the scholarships that have been set up. Just all the good that's come out, that's exactly what he would have wanted to come out of his death," Peterson said.

The three that qualified for the state finals agree that the 2022-23 team was much closer than last year's and that friendship goes beyond swimming.

The Knights had graduated a group of seniors in 2022 that had led them to



Members of the Norwell boys' senior swim class pose together on Senior Night, all with the letter G on their chest. They are, from left to right, Sam Peterson, Mikey Reidenbach III, Reece Lobsiger, Marin Melcher, Emerson Graft, and Thomas Garza. (Photo by Ryan Walker)



Friends and classmates of Gabe Norris at his gravesite at Sparks Cemetery from left to right are: Sam Peterson, Bobby Kwadrans, Marin Melcher, Thomas Garza, and Emerson Graft. (Photo provided)

the school's first sectional title in over a decade. That team included state qualifiers Broderick Page, Jakob Peterson, and Kellen Zimmer, which meant 2022-23 team had some major holes to fill.

"We lost a lot of seniors last year, and we had a great season last year — we were undefeated as well (as this year)," 2023 senior Reidenbach III said. "Trying to transfer that over to this year without those seniors, I didn't think it was going to be doable, but it was, and it's awesome."

Reidenbach, who made an appearance in last year's state finals, competed in four

events this year — the 50-yard freestyle, 100-yard freestyle, and two freestyle relay races.

Senior Sam Peterson qualified for the first time as an individual in the 100-yard butterfly and the two relay races and was thrilled to be able to win the sectional and compete beyond that in his last year.

"It felt pretty satisfying just in my senior year to it finish off," he said.

Emerson Graft was the final senior who advanced to the state finals in the two relay races. Rodrigo Segovia rounded out the group on the relay teams. ♦

Original reporting by Ryan Walker

The 'Friends' of the park create 'Discover Ouabache'

By BARBARA BARBIERI

The premiere edition of "Discover Ouabache," an online publication of park activities that was released shortly after the first of the year, has been well received and used by park visitors, according to the magazine's editor Kathy Schwartz.

An online brochure created for the 2022 Festival of Lights was the inspiration for the publication which will alert visitors to information about the park and to other places to visit near the park. Schwartz, who is a past president of Friends of Ouabache State Park and organizer for the annual Wonderland of Lights fundraiser, explained that the digital form of the magazine has a lower cost and is more ecologically friendly than a printed version.

"Discover Ouabache," will be published four times a year to coincide with the changes of season. The second issue is ready for reading now with a photo of a dragonfly on the front page.

Creative Content Director/Designer is Heather Bremer of Twin Suns Creative. Writers include Jody Heaston, Corney Lehman, Rose Nevil, Pastor Neil Ainslie, Joni Cincotta, Katia Cook, Janella Stroncsek and Alan Daugherty while photographers are Kraig Schwartz, Alan Daugherty and Janella Stroncsek.

Of special interest in the current edition is an article about Odonate (dragonflies and Damselflys) and E.B. Bruce Williamson's study of them.

Other articles in the summer issue include: nature photos taken in the park, information about coming events including Christmas in July on July 22, introduction of the park's naturalists Rose Nevil and Brent Dausch, park upgrades



Introducing the first copy of the online magazine "Discover Ouabache" are the Editor Kathy Schwartz, second from the left, and left to right contributors Joni Cincotta, Schwartz, Jody Heaston, Rose Nevil and Katia Cook. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri)

and announcing park volunteers recognized by the state's park system.

Long time volunteers Phil and Marcia Douglass took top honors at the state gathering and recognized for giving 2,500 hours of their time were Schwartz, Jimmy Grover and Dan Allen.

To view the magazine online go to: discoverouabache.wixsite.com/magazine or scan the nearby QR code.

Lunch & Learn

The Friends group hosts a monthly Lunch & Learn event at the park on the second Thursday of the month.

The next event will be Thursday, July 13 at noon at the Lodge by the Lake. Program presenters will be Rose Nevil and Brent Dausch as they present "Don't Pet the Fluffy Cows." Those attending should bring their own picnic lunch with Corner Depot Catering providing a dessert.



Scan this QR code to get to the magazine website. Then click on "Read Discover" to see the current edition plus archived issues. Another feature added recently is to subscribe (free) to receive notification when a new issue is posted.



Reservations may be made by emailing friendsofouabache@gmail.com or call 260-824-0926. ♦

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Turning an old barn into an event center was no piece of wedding cake

By GLEN WERLING

The true feeling sweeps over the viewer upon entry. The hand-hewn timber beams bespeak of a time past when this majestic structure served a humbler purpose.

Where once the work-a-day world of farming took place, now many couples begin their lives together joined in matrimony under the large terrace that spreads its wooden arms in an embrace toward the setting sun. It's a picture often underscored by the golden brown leaves of autumnal corn or the green foliage from the spring and summer fields that once gave purpose to the cluster of buildings that Nathan and Courtney Keller call home.

These buildings are especially familiar to Nathan Keller. "I grew up here," he recalled in an interview on a breezy, too-warm-for-April evening. The property, located about halfway between Wells County Road 700 North and U.S. 224 on the west side of Ind. 1, has been in Nathan Keller's family for three generations.

The new life for the structure now known as White Rock Barn and Terrace started with Courtney Keller, who was employed as a physician's assistant at Bluffton Regional Medical Center for about eight years. When she and Nathan started their family, they decided Courtney would be a stay-at-home mom. She said the barn offered her the perfect space to exercise one of her joys in life — planning weddings.

"I've always liked weddings, wedding coordinating and planning and creating something beautiful," she said.

"She said, 'Hey, we could make a wedding barn out of this,'" recalled Nathan. "I just laughed, but then I thought about it and thought, 'Well, you know we're not going to be using it for anything else. Let's give it a shot'"

Courtney knew about the big old barn before she and Nathan were married. The Kellers are high school

sweethearts, graduates of Norwell from the Class of 2001. Nathan's father, Kevin, hosted church youth group events in the barn as well as pickup basketball games in the upstairs hay mow. The barn acquired the nickname, "The Keller Dome."

"Everybody remembers The Keller Dome," Nathan said. But now, for public safety reasons, the basketball court is off the venue, but it's still in place upstairs, Nathan said.

Back in those days, the barn featured a dirt floor. It also was just what it appeared to be—a very nice-looking old barn used mainly for storage of odds and ends.

When the Kellers took ownership of it, the barn structurally was in decent shape but to make it meet all of the codes required by the State of Indiana to host public events it required a lot of work.

A lot of work.

"We went through all of the legal routes to do the fire alarm system and improve the structural integrity," Nathan Keller said. They wanted to make sure it was all done correctly as well so they went to Indianapolis and obtained a Chapter 34 evaluation. "We told them, 'Hey this is what we are doing and they told us exactly what we needed to do.'"

An architect evaluated the structure—going through



Nathan and Courtney Keller own and operate White Rock Barn and Terrace on Ind. 1 south of Ossian. The barn is on the property where Nathan grew up. (Photo by Glen Werling)

every beam and bolt, Nathan said—and gave the Kellers a rehabilitation list. There was a lot of work to be done.

"When they told us what all we needed to do, I said, 'We better start now,'" Nathan said.

And the Kellers did most of that work themselves.

"We had to install about 20 kickers and we had to double up on all of the joists," Nathan said. A kicker is a 90-degree angle-iron joist bracing the support beams of the structure and attached to the barn's foundation. It greatly strengthens the structural integrity of the barn, Nathan explained.

He made them all himself.

The one bit of rehab the Kellers did hire out was the pouring of the floor. What looks like an old wooden floor is actually artfully stamped concrete.

The Kellers also built the terrace with the help of a friend. The large entrance/exit leading from the barn to the terrace has an iron

sign on the lintel, shaped and cut by Nathan with a Bible verse from Isaiah 26:4 — "Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock."

"We like people to know that we're a Christ-centered business," Nathan said.

The venture has also been a family affair as the Kellers involve their children in preparation for events and the take-down of decorations afterward. "It's a good way to teach them responsibility," Courtney said.

The barn itself features 2,450 square feet of space while the attached covered terrace space is 2,250 square feet. The Kellers also are able to provide 13 five-foot-diameter round tables, 22 six-foot long tables, and 220 wooden chairs as well as a number of decorative amenities.

White Rock Barn and Terrace also hosts other events such as birthday parties, celebratory dinners, dinner meetings and concerts. The barn and terrace are seasonal, open during the warmer weather months of May through October.

"It's been a good side business. We've met a lot of great people," Courtney said.

So why is the barn called White Rock Barn? "For multiple reasons," Courtney said. "It's white and we have a lot of rocks out back." The terrace is surrounded by multiple gabions of decorative rocks — again the handiwork of Nathan and Courtney.

But there's another reason behind the name.

There's a pond on the property that Kevin Keller had built and the extra dirt and rocks from the ground that



Like a miniature snow-capped mountain, the white rock that gave White Rock Barn and Terrace its name rests against the foundation on the barn's south side. (Photo by Glen Werling)



The hand-hewn timber beams are original, but the floors both inside and outside on the back terrace were added as part of the major renovation necessary in order to meet state public-event building standards to fulfill Courtney Keller's vision. (Photos provided)

was removed from where the pond was built were mounded up behind the barn.

One of the rocks that was put in the mound was a large rock that Nathan's father used to paint white every year, dat-

ing back to when he was growing up on the property.

"He didn't even know that it got thrown in with the dirt into the mound," Nathan said. "I'm not sure why he and his friends

used to paint the rock white. I think it was like a running joke," he added.

The rock is now located on the south side of the barn, although quite a bit of its white paint has faded. ♦

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His legacy lives on

What Zach Bertsch began continues to grow 10 years after his death

Zach Bertsch stands above one of the Cancer Redemption Project Homes of Hope during one of his trips to Haiti. Bertsch was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer in 2010, but before he died in 2013, he and his wife, Jenny, worked with Bluffton-based Loving Shepherd Ministries to inspire others to raise funds to build homes for orphaned and vulnerable children. (Photos provided)

By CHET BAUMGARTNER

By the time Marie turned 7, her father had died. Her siblings beat her, and her grandfather, who practiced voodoo, had cast a spell on her.

By the time David turned 11, his father had left and his mother had died. He lived with a family that enslaved him and beat him when he didn't clean the house or fetch the water quickly enough.

By the time Cindy turned 12, her parents had both died, and she danced weekly for a voodoo priestess, who also enslaved her.

By the time Zach Bertsch turned 27, he oversaw the day-to-day operations at Christian Care Retirement Center as its administrator, and he and Jenny, his wife of almost four years, purchased a house large enough not only for their two children, but also the children they planned to foster.

But before Zach could turn 31, he was bedridden and dying from stage IV colon cancer.

Marie, David and Cindy slept in their own beds, however. They ate three meals a day. They attended school daily and church weekly.

And every morning, they could hug their new mom and dad, a Christian couple who were raising them in their new homes — homes the Bertsches inspired

others to help build through the Loving Shepherd Ministries Cancer Redemption Project.

There's more: This initiative inspired more than six homes for 72 Haitian children.

In the 10 years since Bertsch died June 6, 2013, the Bluffton-based nonprofit that built those homes has added another six to this "Redemption Campus," and these homes for 144 orphans and vulnerable children have created an "anchor" for the nearby impoverished community of Cavaillon, the nonprofit's president, Doug Isch, said.

Additionally, he continued, they inspired Loving Shepherd to bless other communities in ways the organization had not originally envisioned — and these blessings will endure for decades to come, he believes.

"It still inspires me," Isch said. "This has the potential to impact thousands with generational, eternal impact. "Looking back, we felt like this was a pivotal time in LSM's story."

Along with the initial six homes, the Cancer Redemption Project funded a school, and in a country where about 7 percent graduate, already several children from the Redemption campus homes are attending Loving Shepherd's post-secondary vocational school, LSM Tech.

Without the homes, though, they probably wouldn't have even attended school, Isch said.

"These are kids, I don't know any other word to define them but 'hopeless.' Their situation was completely hopeless," Isch said. "Whatever God-given talent they had been given would almost certainly not have been developed.

"It really is a night-and-day difference from the vast majority of Haitian young people."

Loving Shepherd has also opened the school to the Cavaillon community, and today about a third of the students come from there.

"Loving Shepherd's Redemption school has been phenomenal in its ability to do really well in educating kids ... and that's part of what's drawn outside kids to the school," Isch said.

Likewise, people from the community attend the church Loving Shepherd built on the campus, and between them and the Redemption families and others, more than 200 people attend each week.

"A community has been built around this anchor of a church and a school," Isch said. "I think it's made a huge difference."

In fact, because of this difference, and because of logistical reasons, Isch said Loving Shepherd decided to only develop campuses going forward, and it's current-

ly developing a six-home campus near the village of Welsh, with the third building scheduled for completion in July.

The children at the Welsh campus will attend a school Loving Shepherd already runs, and the children will also attend the nearby church. However, Isch said, Loving Shepherd intends to include a school and church in each of its future campuses.

"We've really bought into the campus model," Isch said. "We've seen just tremendous benefits in having young people and families be able to support each other."

Loving Shepherd had already built eight "Homes of Hope" in Haiti when the Bertsches approached Ed Schwartz, then president of Loving Shepherd, in 2010. Furthermore, the nonprofit had already established a model for each home: Orphaned and vulnerable children would live under the care of a Haitian Christian couple, who provide the blessings of a stable home life.

Unlike many group homes in the United States, however, the Homes of Hope children stay as the years pass, and they only leave when they graduate and attend a post-secondary school or to live on their own as adults—and yet they can always return to their Homes of Hope parents and families.

"They are family," Schwartz said.

“Orphanages, group homes and foster families are not long-term solutions as children age-out during their teenage years and before they’re ready to face the stark reality of the world,” Schwartz said. “LSM’s Homes of Hope are very similar to our own biological homes and families. Our own biological children live at our homes until they move out, but they are always part of the family.”

Though the Bertshes supported this model, they wanted to help build more than another home. They wanted to inspire a project the nonprofit couldn’t pursue without a special funding initiative.

Schwartz then proposed the concept of a campus — one that could possibly include four homes.

Bertsch said he didn’t know if they could fund that ambitious of a project, but he agreed to at least try, Schwartz later wrote.

And then the funding started coming. “Zach and Jenny’s passion and God’s hand on this project was just remarkable,” Isch said.

Bertsch in particular traveled to 28 churches to promote the project and raise funds, and Jenny Bertsch traveled to most of them as well, and after

Bertsch died, she continued working with Loving Shepherd for several more years. She helped with its adoption program and continued to promote the Redemption homes, as well as Loving Shepherd’s other programs.

In 2016, she married Jordan Miller, and the couple moved to Van Wert, Ohio. Today they attend a church in Paulding County, Ohio.

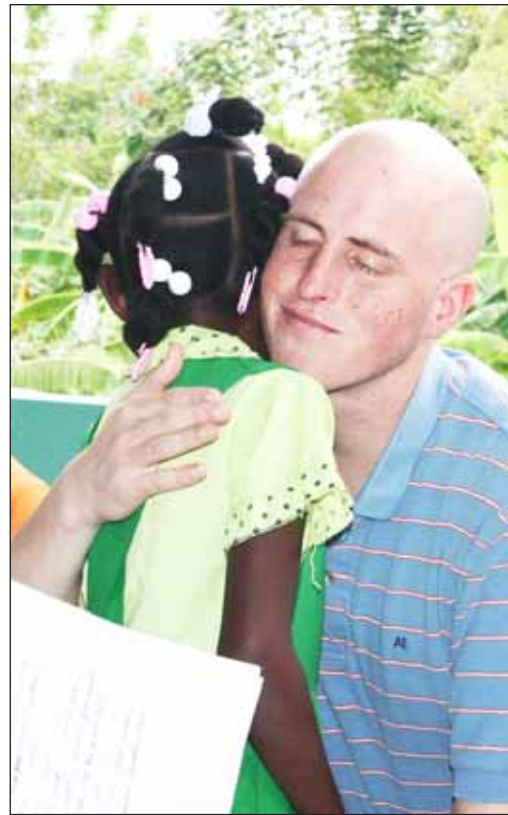
One Sunday in September 2017, a woman approached Jenny at church “with tears in her eyes,” she wrote on her blog.

“(She) shared with me that she is Christian today in part because of Zach’s testimony.” As the girl shared her testimony, Zach and Jenny’s daughter, Moriah, listened and asked several questions.

“I am so thankful that she could witness the impact of Zach’s life and death on another person, and I pray that as she grows her Daddy Zach’s testimony will draw her to Christ too,” Jenny wrote.

“That was one of Zach’s thoughts all along, that if one additional person gets to Heaven because of my cancer, it will be worth it,” Isch said. ♦

(Note: The Haitian children’s names have been changed to respect their privacy)



Zach Bertsch hugs one of the children Loving Shepherd invited to live in one of the Homes of Hope Bertsch inspired others to help build.

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Two teams make local gridiron and links history

Two Wells County high school teams made history this past school year. Bluffton's football team claimed its first sectional title in 34 years while Southern Wells' girls' golf team had two historical firsts: an ACAC championship and a sectional title.

The Tigers' feat was done in dramatic fashion, winning the sectional championship for the first time since 1988 with a 42-35 comeback victory over the Eastbrook Panthers.

"This is a program that they've bought in(to) from absolute day one, and this is the culmination of six years of work and even years of work before that," a jittery and excited head coach Brent Kunkel said after the game on Nov. 4. "To be in this moment right now, it's just a credit to our kids and our community, administration, assistant coaches. Give them all the praise and all the credit. I'm just a guy. These kids bought in."

The victory did not come easy, as on the other sideline was the perennial power that is the Eastbrook Panthers, coached by Grant County Hall of Fame's Jeff Adamson. The Panthers were looking for its 17th sectional title under Adamson and had the advantage for the majority of the game.

In fact, they had not one, but two 14-point leads in both the first and second halves, but each time, the Tigers managed to tie the score.

The final turning point came in the fourth quarter with score knotted at 35-each. After taking the ball from their own 15-yard-line to Bluffton's two, the Tigers made a dramatic goal line stand with senior Andrew Hunt intercepting an Eastbrook pass.

"It was a heavyweight fight, and we kept taking shots, and then we would make a play. Then, we just found a way," Kunkel said.

It was all Bluffton from that point on.

"Never say die," Kunkel said. "They've refused to quit. It's that mental toughness. We continued to fight and continued to do it."

— — —

Meanwhile last fall, the Southern Wells girls' golf team had two history-making weekends in a row.

On Saturday, Sept. 10, the Raiders took the seven-team ACAC tournament in dominant fashion with a score of 413. That was

better by 16 strokes over second-place South Adams.

Head coach Ross Palmer said the group has been inching towards post-season success in recent years.

"It's a huge accomplishment for our girls," coach Palmer said. "I've got four seniors, so they've been working for this for a long time, and it's always been something that's been in reach for them even in past years but just didn't quite make it over the hump."

Southern Wells had two of the best golfers in the ACAC, Grace Meeks and Kayleigh Jones. The two earned back-to-back first-team all-conference honors this past year. Meeks has been a medalist on several occasions, including the conference's top performer at the event; Jones took fifth place at the meet.

The two are not only a one-two punch on the scorecard but Palmer's leaders on a varsity team of six.

"Having Kayleigh and Grace were two weapons out on the course at all times," he said. "I know that all the other teams that we play are pretty excited for them to finally graduate. They're focused, and they take every shot seriously throughout the round, and that's important for everybody on the team to see that focus and that drive can get you those types of things. Those kinds of successes like first-team all-conference."

That team mindset continued into that second weekend, taking the sectional title at Arbor Trace Golf Club north of Marion with a team score of 318, 18 better than second-place Northfield.

Individually, Meeks was tied for second-best at the event, shooting an 88. Jones finished second for the Raiders with a 94, Caroline Ripperger and Hannah Duncan were next, each with a 104, and Jadyne Yencer with a 105.

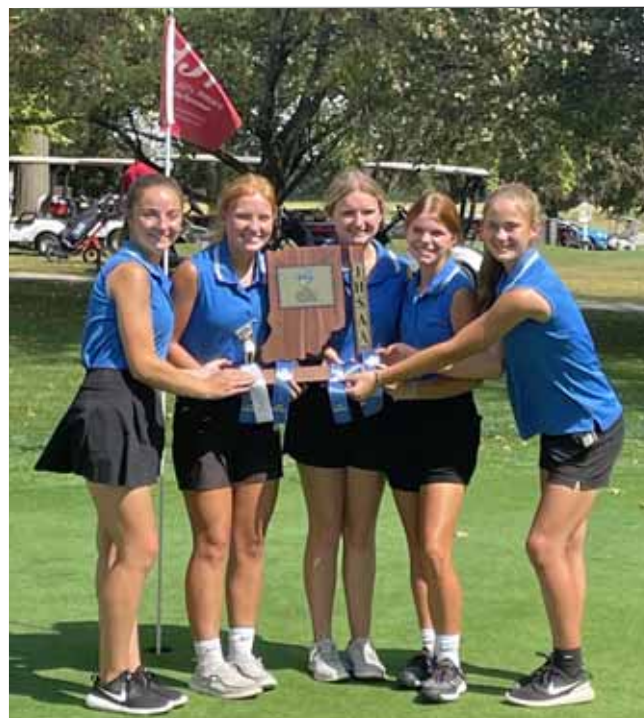
The Raiders would join their in-county competitors, Bluffton and Norwell, at the regional the following weekend but none would survive to advance to state.

"It's been a great season, it's been a lot of fun, lot of success, and hopefully that's the start of a tradition now for our team," Palmer said. ♦

Original reporting by Ryan Walker



Seniors, from left, Nick Morrow, Anthony Cruz and Kayden King hold the sectional trophy high at the 50-yard line Nov. 4, 2022. (Photo by Michael Vanderkolk)



Members of the Southern Wells girls' golf team from left to right are Grace Meeks, Kayleigh Jones, Hannah Duncan, Jadyne Yencer, and Caroline Ripperger. (Photo courtesy Ross Palmer)

A place that offers a prodigal opportunity

By DAVE SCHULTZ

Maybe what occupies 315 E. Market St. is a halfway house, existing between unchurched people who are not unspiritual and a classic congregation of any denomination. Maybe it's a Christian community all its own, providing hope and comfort and instruction.

Steve Rhoades, who has a background as an educator, felt called to set up the ministry. He and his wife Stephanie moved into the building — they live on the second floor — and Steve keeps office hours on the first floor.

The purpose for the building, he said, is to “reach out to people who are not comfortable in a traditional church setting.”

Rhoades' ministry, known as The Meeting Place, moved into the East Market Street facility last year. It's not the location that's important, however.

There is a young people's ministry that doesn't even make use of the building. Their meetings — which has about 10 people interested in it — meets in various restaurants and other community sites. There is a Bible study that meets on Sunday night, which is a new feature this year, but that's as far as it's going to go as far as Sunday meetings.

“We don't have any plans to start a Sunday morning service,” he said. “We really don't want to compete with local churches. But we do want to offer something on a regular basis, so we have a weekly Bible group that meets here on Sunday evening and that continues to grow.”

He has a shining example of the type of people The Meeting Place wants to reach.

“In the United States, about 70 percent of the population claims to be Christians,”

he said. “Many of them are former church attenders, so they have some knowledge, but they haven't been back for all sorts of reasons — some of them because they (the churches) ask for money, some of them because they didn't treat them right. There's such a variety of reasons, but they're still curious about God and they still have this desire for a relationship with God and so we're here to provide a different opportunity for them.”

In a recent conversation, he emphasizes the problems conventional churches may have with people who have fled from them.

“There are a lot of great churches,” Rhoades said, prefacing his remarks. On the other hand, he said, “I was talking to a local pastor, explaining what we are doing, and he said he has a small congregation of about 35 to 50 people on Sunday morning. He said that (his) congregation is not really accepting of newcomers. He's sad about that, but that is the truth. They've been here for such a long period of time that it's hard for others to break into that group.”

“In the same light, I'd say about some of the large congregations that we have here, it can be intimidating to be in a large group setting and not understanding all of the things that are going on — and maybe not feeling comfortable with the size.”

(It should be noted that one of the supporters of The Meeting Place is a traditional church — the church they consider their home church, the County Line Church of God on the Allen/DeKalb county line.)

Rhoades had a booth in the Wells County Senior Expo in May and made some contacts there. He hasn't done a lot of advertising, thus far just relying on



Steve Rhoades discusses the goals of The Meeting Place inside the ministry's home base on East Market Street. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

word of mouth — and meeting people at places like the Senior Expo — that make him think he can make a difference in people's lives.

There is a woman who has been attending the Sunday night study since

February “who's never been to church in her entire life, but she has read the Bible on her own for 24 years.”

“We are reaching out to the community and we will continue to do that in a variety of ways,” Rhoades said. ♦



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Lifewise Academy

(Continued from Page 13)

site. Maller stated the group does this to increase recognition with the brand as more communities are introduced to religious instruction release time.

Lifewise Academy lessons walk students through The Gospel Project, a non-denominational curriculum from LifeWay Christian Resources. Over the curriculum's five years, students will complete an overview of the entire Bible.

The lessons include a brief video, class discussion and coordinating activity about a Bible story. These stories are used to discuss what character traits the students should embody. For example, students talked about how to show compassion to others when learning about Moses in the basket.



Rhonda Maller

“(The mission) just totally won my heart,” said Maller. “And I think it’s done the same for many in the community — we’ve gotten a lot of support.”

OES teachers Mimi Stettler and Taylor Gerber echoed this sentiment. Both teachers have a background in either teaching or ministry and saw Lifewise Academy as an opportunity to use their skills to reach local children.

“How might we show compassion to a friend in our class?” Gerber asked her kindergarten students after the lesson. One girl’s hand shot up. “If they’re sad, we could ask if they need a hug,” she replied eagerly.

Brandy Aschliman and Tara Frauhiger are spearheading iterations of the program at Bluffton-Harrison and Southern Wells elementary schools. These respective programs will be open for two grades and are expected to launch next school year. ♦



Kindergarten students Adelyn Jones and Rose Thumbleson sit with Lifewise Academy volunteer Brittany Gerber while working on their craft. (Photo by Holly Gaskill)

War weary

(Continued from Page 11)

they’re happy kids still,” Alyssa Aschliman.

Like the Aschlimans, Bluffton residents Steve and Nikki Surbaugh felt some “growing pains” when the Volkov family of three joined their family of five.

And they felt it a little more when the Volkovs became a family of four when Evelina was born May 16.

“It’s a joy to have a new life in the house,” Steve Surbaugh said.

Surbaugh said Evelina’s mother, Liubov, went into labor the day after the Surbaughs returned from vacation, ensuring that Nikki Surbaugh could “advocate” for her and help with any translations. Nikki Surbaugh also helped Liubov learn to install her first car seat and secure Evelina in it.

Of course with a family with a newborn in the basement, the Surbaughs needed to help their own children respect the newborn’s needs.

“How do you help your kids to think of not yelling?” he asked.

Yet his kids — as well as he and Nikki — have also learned more about compassion, he said.

“Any chance God gives you to think less of yourself ends up being for our good,” he said. “It produces a different kind of joy in our lives.”

“All day, it’s a new world,” Artiushenko said before a Saturday church service. “Sometimes I want to go home.”



Gil Fiechter, left, shares a lollipop with Violetta Tarasova during a doctor’s appointment. Fiechter’s parents — Klint and Sarah — sponsored Violetta’s parents, Ukrainians who moved to Wells County in July of 2022 to escape the war. (Photo provided)

Artiushenko, however, can’t go home, he said. He believes the Russians destroyed not only his home, but his city.

Fennig said Russian forces had damaged or destroyed 90 percent of the structures in two of the cities where the Wells



Luke Fleming, left, and Aleksander Volkov review a white board with English phrases as the two ask and answer questions during an English-language class which are held weekly at the Wells County Public Library. (Photo by Chet Baumgartner)

County friends lived. These forces seized homes and businesses in another city, and as of June 5th, they were actively shelling two more cities.

More families, then, will need to resettle, she said. And yet, they’ll also over-

come, she said.

“They have been so resilient and so inspiring in the worst of situations,” she said. “They’ve become some of my best friends. I think they’ve helped me because they have such a powerful testimony.” ♦

Teacher of the year

(Continued from Page 18)

waved to the crowd gathered at the 2023 Indy 500 Festival Parade, where she rode in a convertible like royalty.

Cocanower says the BHMSD community's support has been instrumental.

"When people ask me how I'm doing, I try to be honest about how hard and how affirming being Indiana Teacher of the Year is while also teaching full time. I've been given an amazing opportunity, but it breaks my heart to be away from students and to feel like I'm not creating the learning environment I pride myself on or be able to coach a sport I love," Cocanower says. "Our students and families have been gracious and understanding, and I couldn't go and serve students and educators in our state without their support. I just hope that my gratitude to all those whose shoulders I stand on is clear."

Perhaps the biggest experience so far was a trip with her colleagues to the nation's capital.

In early May, her state teachers of the year cohort met in Washington, D.C. to recognize the National Teacher of the Year, Rebecka Peterson of Oklahoma. The week-long trip included a nationally livestreamed ceremony celebrating public education at the White House with President Joe Biden and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden.

"If you'd have asked me if this would be a part of my teaching story, I wouldn't have believed you," Cocanower said about her time at the White House. "It was a humbling, emotional, and an awesome day carrying BHMSD, my family, my friends, my teachers, our larger community, but most importantly my students in my heart every step of the way!"

As part of Cocanower's trip to Washington, D.C., BHMSD was asked to send thank you cards from students and provide a video message from a parent to be included in the White House reception.

In the video, Rachel Maggard said Cocanower has encouraged her son Ben's love of history.

"Mrs. Cocanower, thank you for making Ben feel confident," Maggard said. "Thank you for making Ben feel like he matters. Thank you for sharing in his love of history. Thank you for being a teacher that we will remember fondly for the rest of our lives."

Portions of Maggard's video were later shared in a White House video highlight-

ing the impact teachers have on their students.

Several students from BHS also wrote cards and two classes from Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School signed cards as well, thanking Cocanower for inspiring them to be world changers. They were displayed in the White House as part of Teacher Appreciation Week in early May.

When she came back from D.C., Cocanower shared her experiences at her school, recapping her trip for BHMSD faculty and staff.

"Coming home from a week in Washington D.C. advocating for students, teachers, and families, it's not lost on me that I was able to have that experience because of what we all do together for #ONEBluffton," she wrote in

her invitation to staff. "Thank you. Your kindness and support have literally carried me throughout this year. Being Indiana Teacher of the Year isn't just about me, it's about US!"

And that's Cocanower's goal: Not only to elevate teacher and student successes on a larger stage, but to bring her experiences back home to Wells County to share with colleagues and students here.

"I see myself as a representative of Bluffton schools, so it's not just about me," she said in the fall. "It's about all the people around me that do their jobs really, really well every day, that pick me up on days that I'm struggling. It's about our administration that serves kids well and supports me well."

And Cocanower serves BHS in a variety of ways. She coaches girls' golf and track and field and serves as the high ability coordinator at BHS. As the school's co-technology coordinator, she supports her fellow teachers in using technology to build more engaging and accessible lessons.

She also mentors first-year educators and hosts cadet teachers, encouraging students to consider careers in history and education. This past school year, Cocanower partnered with BHS teacher Vicki Van Matre to offer a new Principles of Teaching course, which introduces high school students to the education profession.

"Mrs. Cocanower embodies the qualities of a highly effective educator while maintaining the necessary genuine authenticity to best connect her students with success," Yates says. "I have witnessed Mrs. Cocanower's influence on my own children both in the classroom and on the golf course. Her lasting impact on students continues to be a bright spot in our profession as she is a true represen-



Tara Cocanower



Cocanower's travels have also taken her to meet with other states' outstanding teachers at Google headquarters in California. (Photo provided)

tation of an excellent teacher."

Speaking engagement after speaking engagement, listeners have connected with how genuine Cocanower is.

"I am striving to lead with vulnerability and authenticity because I want students to see me push myself outside my comfort zone, something I ask of them quite often," she says. "It's not easy, but it's worth it, students are worth it, and Bluffton is worth it." ♦

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The morning-after scene, at left, includes some lingering smoke from smoldering that continued for a few days. “You couldn’t really put it completely out because it was an all-steel structure,” Bruce Herr said. Nine months later, the original white building had been totally replaced with a new red one. “Red? No particular reason,” Herr said. (News-Banner photos)



The Herr family was back up to full speed in about nine months

(Continued from Page 16)

next morning, we were shocked.” The birds were fine. The lights in the barns are turned off each night so that the chickens have a normal day/night sleep cycle.

“They just woke up the next morning and started laying eggs, like nothing had happened,” Twilla said. The chickens had apparently slept through the night’s events.

“We turned the power back on and the temperature dropped like 10 degrees in three minutes,” Zane added. The family had to scramble to get the coolers back up and running (the eggs need to be stored at 62 degrees before they are shipped out) and the conveyor belts that bring the eggs to the packing room running again. The fire had melted some of the controls.

“So hats off to the fire departments,” Bruce said. “They saved half our income.”

— — —

The next several weeks were absorbed by meetings with insurance investigators, engineers from the variety of companies that had equipment in the building, and “we had to deal with some lawyers,” Bruce said.

“At one point, I think there were 60 guys crawling around here,” he continued. That was part of the process in trying to pinpoint the fire’s cause, which was never determined.

“The investigator was convinced that the fire had started in the packing room, which is where all the equipment is,” Twilla explained. “But I had pictures. It started in the middle.”

With nothing more to do after they’d called 911, “like any good modern Americans, we got out our phones and

drove around the back and took pictures,” she continued. “So there’s a lesson there: If you have a fire, take pictures.”

Meanwhile, the family had a big decision to make: Do we rebuild?

“He and I were like, ‘no,’” Twilla began. “I’m 55,” Bruce chimed in, “we have this other barn. Maybe we’d just ride it out and call it a good career. But he and his brother wanted it to come back.”

Bruce indicated their two sons, Zane, 25 and Abe, 23. “They kind of gave us the thumbs up,” Twilla added.

The two work full time on the 250-acre farm, growing mostly hay for a few sheep they keep, selling the rest. There are the chickens of course, and the family began a commercial wine-making operation — Dash-90 Winery — which also keeps them busy. The Herr family includes three grown daughters — Aca-cia, Sadie and Annie — who are not involved in the farm’s operations.

The concrete floor had almost totally survived the blaze — a few patches had to be repaired. That was completed on Oct. 27 and “we had birds back on March 23,” Zane reported. Among all the reports of supply-chain issues, getting the building supplies and replacement equipment was never an issue, Bruce said. “And some of the equipment came from as far away as the Netherlands.”

“Our insurance company was fantastic,” Bruce said, and then quickly added that he serves on the board of directors of the Indiana Farm Bureau. “But that actually caused some issues because they had to make sure they didn’t give us special treatment.” And, as it turned out, the adjustor was not aware of the relationship until after the process had



This photo taken by Zane Herr utilizing a drone shows the full extent of the damage to the all-steel building and its close proximity to the “twin” barn to the west. Fortunately, what breeze there was that night was from the west and firefighters focused most of their efforts on keeping the west building covered with water. (Photo provided)

been completed. Bruce is also the Chester Township trustee.

Everything in the new barn is “state of the art,” Zane said, although it has a different look: Originally white, the new barn is red.

“You know, the fire was tragic, but it was just a barn,” Bruce mused. “It wasn’t our house. No one was hurt. You just deal with it and go on.”

“We had a lot of people that reached out to us,” Twilla added. “Churches, families brought food and offered any help. It’s pretty amazing, pretty cool how fast and how many people came out. We’re pretty fortunate to live in Wells County.” ♦



The firefighting crews were able to save the parallel barn that also houses 30,000 chickens. (Photo provided)

A family business marks 90 years

Mostly the same building but always the same mission: 'do it right'

By MARK MILLER

Not very many businesses celebrate a 90th anniversary. Fewer do that in a building that's older than that.

"One of the local antique dealers was in here a while back," fourth-generation owner-operator Carson Mann shares. He had stopped in to pay a bill. "He said, 'how much do you want for this old fire extinguisher?' I told him it wasn't for sale, and then he'd ask about something else."

The building at 219 E. Perry St. is at least 100 years old, Mann figures. "I was always told it was originally a horse barn, which makes sense. They added on to the back there (to the east) at some point."

Mann's great-grandfather, Albert "Bert" Moser started the Moser Tin Shop in 1933. In 1937, their ad in the News-Banner's Centennial Edition listed their address as 199 N. Main St, and they had a two-digit phone number: 21. Mann's limited archives do not reveal just when the move was made to East Perry Street.

Bert Moser originally made rain gutters, air ducts for furnaces and in the summers — before there was air conditioning — sharpened lawn mower blades. Working on furnace repair and maintenance was a natural part of that as well. At some point, one of the Moser boys began working with their dad and the business name was changed to Moser & Son Heating and Air Conditioning.

The next generation officially entered the scene in 1957, when Bert turned it over to his two sons, Kenneth and Frank, along with son-in-law Leon Mann, who had married Betty Moser. By 1967, Mann had become the sole owner; he would turn the keys over to his son Steve on Feb. 1, 1984. At that time, the father-and-son

ran an ad in The News-Banner announcing the change, complete with a picture of Leon handing a set of keys over to Steve. The ad included both the business phone number and a "home phone."

Carson Mann grew up in the business. He recalls helping his father on late-night calls, "standing on a bucket and holding a light for him," he says. And there were times he would fall asleep doing that. "It was late," he adds, chuckling. After graduating from Bluffton High School in 1996, he earned his trade certification at the University of Northwestern Ohio in Lima.

"I learned a lot from my grandpa," he says today. "He told me to be honest with people and to do the job right the first time. That's been our golden rule." He believes it has served them well.

The century-old building on East Perry has also served the four generations well. He has often been asked about building anew, and has even fielded several unsolicited offers to purchase it.

"Someone wanted to move it and convert it into a home," he says, somewhat amazed. "But it serves our purpose, and we're never here anyway but to get parts and pick up the jobs."

The "we" includes Mann, now 45, and his five workers. The business, just as others, has experienced turnover and the difficulty of finding qualified workers. "But we've got a good crew right now; they've been with us for a good while."

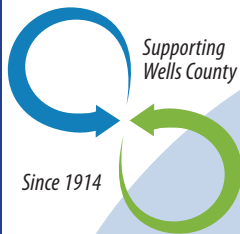
Carson Mann remembers celebrating their 80th anniversary "just a few years ago," he says, "and 100 will be here soon enough." And he plans to be there, in the same building his great-grandfather once worked in. ♦



Carson Mann, fourth-generation owner of Moser & Son Heating and Air Conditioning in the century-plus-old building on East Perry Street, which contains any number of relics that reflect the business' history, now 90 years and counting. (Photo by Mark Miller)



Four generations of the Moser-Mann family have been serving customers from the former horse barn on East Perry Street. Above left, Kenny Moser and his father Albert "Bert" Moser pose in front of the then-unpainted building. The year this picture was taken is unknown, Carson Mann says. "I'm amazed that it's in color." The truck and the phone numbers suggest it was either in the late 1940s or early '50s. Note that the "Night" phone number is "1032-M." Above right, Bert Moser's son-in-law, Leon "Shorty" Mann hands over the keys of the business to his son Steve in 1984. At right, Steve and his son Carson pose for a picture to celebrate the 80th anniversary in 2013. Steve retired in 2016.



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(Continued from Page 13)

pay. "I don't remember it that way," she says.

But it took an intensive fund-raising campaign, and perhaps the only joint session of the Adams County Council and the Wells County Council, to help bail the agency out.

Remembering those dark days helped Nicholas keep every ensuing challenge in perspective.

At BCS, few truly retire

BCS currently employs more than half a dozen people over age 70, including two 80-year-olds.

Perhaps that's not surprising when you consider that one of the most important traits when working with

adults with intellectual disabilities is patience — something that typically improves with age.

Flexibility — relief staff need only commit to 12 hours per month — and the opportunity to get paid to go out to eat and other fun activities are other enticements for older employees to keep working past retirement age.

Direct support professionals often simply reduce their hours rather than retire. With management, retiring often means downshifting into a less time-consuming position.

John Whicker, who retired as agency president over a decade ago when Tim Ramsey took over, stayed at BCS in a part-time accounting role until he was elected mayor of Bluffton.

Jody Heaston

(Continued from Page 21)

look at the Bradt Nature Area in the park — an amazing project, Heaston explains.

Another closer-to-home experience has been the working with the Friends of Ouabache as they raised the money for the restoration of the park's fire tower.

When it is decided what the Friends project will be carried out

at rebuilding McCormick Creek's campground, recovering from the spring tornado, she will be the coordinator of that project.

Heaston explains, "I feel blessed to work with many people around the state that just want to give back to state parks and where last year over 12,000 volunteers donated over 140,000 hours of their time."

Heaston and her husband Steve are residents of Ossian and the parents of three daughters: Cora, completing her freshman year at Purdue; Emmy,

Former Supported Living Administrator Larry Braun, who retired from that position at the end of 2021, continues to work part-time with clients, attending Tin Caps games, playing disc golf and going for bike rides. "I'm having a great time," he said recently.

Perhaps it wasn't surprising, then, that Bussard elected to work part-time in lieu of retirement, setting her own hours and sharing her expertise as needed.

Though Nicholas thoroughly enjoyed her time as HR director, she says that phase of her life is over. "I'm never sitting behind a desk ever again," she said at a retirement potluck held in her honor in May, after she'd recovered enough to attend. ♦

completing her junior year at Norwell High School and Laken, completing fifth grade at Ossian Elementary. Heaston's daughters often assist with her naturalist programs when they are in the area.

"I enjoy working with volunteers and teaching people about the environment," Heaston says. "And being able to travel to different state parks as I coordinate volunteers and the IMN program is a highlight too. Indiana has great parks, with each one being so different." ♦

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A quiet evening at the state park



Nestled on the eastern edge of Bluffton, rests one of Wells County's gems. Ouabache State Park is lush with green trails and wildlife.

You'll pass by the gatehouse and pay a small entrance fee before driving on into the calming forest scene. Pay close attention to catch glimpses of the many deer, turkeys, foxes, and other plentiful wildlife.

Follow the road through the forest where you'll encounter trails around the park's Kunkel Lake, the bison exhibit, Flatwoods Nature Preserve, and various wildflower patches. The park also offers paved bike trails, campgrounds, and opportunity for sports with its many ball courts. For stunning views of the park, climb the fire tower next to the bison exhibit.

Above all, be sure to enjoy the relaxing sights and sounds that Ouabache has to offer all of its guests. ♦

Text and photos by Carrie Penrod





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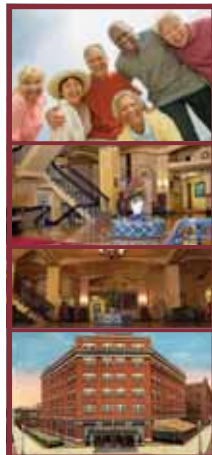
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Indiana Room preserves the county's history

By **BARBARA BARBIERI**

There is what many consider a “hidden gem” within the Wells County Public Library, particularly if you are working on a family genealogy or local history project. The Indiana Room is located on the second floor.

Jason Habegger, adult service manager and Alice Curry, who answers genealogy requests, are in charge of the area where the study tables and chairs were once used in the Carnegie Library across the street.

There is a \$10 per hour charge for Curry to research a genealogy request arriving by mail, but the area also is a popular site for out-of-town visitors to work on finding family history information. Most of the materials must be used on site, as many of the family history publications are “one of a kind” types.

Habegger and Curry also explain they are asked a lot of questions about the area, the most common ones being “Where was the White Bridge?” and “What happened to the Psi Ote pool?”

In addition to the shelved materials that include those of history of the area, family genealogies (donated to the library) and high school yearbooks (going back to 1897) the Indiana Room offers a large variety of online information, including:

- Two microfilm readers/printers and a microfilm reader that allow past copies of Bluffton’s newspapers, including The News-Banner, to be called up, read and copies printed. The collection begins in 1866 but there are many gaps in coverage in the earlier years. (Habegger has an arrangement with the state to have these added to the collection as soon as there is an opening in the state’s printing schedule.)

- A Marriage Index (1837-April 12, 1980)

- Birth Index (1883-1920)
- Wells County portion of the Federal Census on microfilm (1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930)

- Index of the Indiana portion of the Federal Census (1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860 (north Indiana only), 1870, 1880 (Wells county only))

- Index of the Indiana Territorial Census of 1807.

More genealogical information may be obtained from the Cem-Obit (Cemetery-Obituary) program, as it contains more information such as marriage data, whether obits have been scanned, plot informa-

tion, etc. Information for this has been entered and edited by many different staff members and volunteers over the period of several years.

It is constantly being updated. Anyone who can add information to or correct information already there should contact genealogy@wellscolibrary.org.

Supplemental marriage records are available as well as a cemetery index.

Over the years a group of volunteers has assisted in getting the indexes up to date and digitalized. Mary Beth Patterson currently is working on obituaries from the 1980s while Cindy Hedges and recently deceased Day Johnson have worked on other updates. Habegger explains more volunteers would be welcome.

Habegger also is hoping to get a collection of maps, many that were secured by Wells County surveyor Jarrod Hahn, digitalized. Other materials donated to the library and awaiting digitalization include records from the now permanently closed Friends Church of Keystone and memorabilia from Rem Johnston (the last member of a Bluffton family).

The library also has been assisting the Wells County Historical Society in cataloging their materials, although it was halted during the COVID years and has yet to be resumed.

There is a continuous weeding process going on as multiple copies of materials are discovered and consolidated. Information on family histories and genealogies are always welcomed as donations, but never paid for. The current “History of Wells County Schools 1837-2022” was a recent donation from the Wells County Historical Society. ♦



Visitors to the Indiana Room at the Wells County Public Library will probably find either Jason Habegger, at left, or Alice Curry, at right, ready, willing and able to assist them with securing information about Wells county history or genealogy. (Photos by Barbara Barbieri)



The Indiana Room is located on the second floor of the Wells County Public Library in Bluffton.

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Their mission was to compile a history of Wells County's one-room schools for the Wells County Historical Society. After two years of research, the three authors celebrated the publication of "The History of Wells County Schools 1837-2022" in March. Left to right wearing their "little red schoolhouse" T-shirts are Marcia Hotopp, Connie Brubaker and Lynn Elliott. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri)

Mission Accomplished

County's one-room schools chronicled in historical society's published book

By **BARBARA BARBIERI**

The three authors of "The History of Wells County Schools 1837-2022" have completed their project, undertaken for the Wells County Historical Society.

The authors (Connie Brubaker, Lynn Elliott and Marcia Hotopp) unveiled the book at a book-signing event at the Wells County Public Library as they presented a book to the library's Indiana Room.

When the project began it was thought that there were 101 one-room schools serving grades one through eight. But after much research, the committee located more than 120 schools, many which are pictured in the book.

These first schools housed between 15 to 27 students with at least three high schools in the county offering grades nine through twelve.

After the Common Schools consolidated into the Township Schools all twelve grades were offered in each of the nine townships.

Documenting the log schools has been made more difficult because the large fireplaces in the schools made them very susceptible to fire. The same fate followed with the frame schools. Following the fires of log schools new ones were often built just across the road from the original but in a different section with a name change.

The brick structures also had many dif-

ferent names but the district number usually remained the same. This has made identification a bit easier.

The editing trio have run across some interesting stories as they have been doing their research. One such story involves the financing of the Jackson Center School. When they had a problem with finding the funds to complete their structure they tore down the brick one-room school and used the bricks to finish construction of the new building.

Another discovery was that when a house in Liberty Township caught fire near the Bly School the students emptied their lunch pails, rushed to the water pump, filled their pails with water and put out the fire.

Brubaker researched Union, Jefferson and Rockcreek townships; Hotopp did the same for Lancaster and Harrison townships and Elliott tackled Liberty, Jackson, Chester and Nottingham townships. Others assisting with the project were Alan Daugherty, Surveyor Jarrod Hahn and staff from the Indiana Room at the Wells County Public Library

The book is being sold by the Wells County Historical Society for \$50, with the proceeds from the sales to go to the construction of a handicap entrance ramp to the Historical Museum.

Current Museum hours are on Wednesday and Sunday afternoons from 1 to 4 p.m. There is no admission charge. ♦

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Data gives good reviews to Wells school districts

By **HOLLY GASKILL**

How does early education correlate to success later in life? Why do advanced class opportunities matter? Where are state education standards headed?

With the Indiana Department of Education's new dashboard, Wells County residents can gain clarity for those types of questions and more.

The recently-launched Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed dashboard, also called Indiana GPS, is the result of 2021 legislation that required the state to make district data more transparent and available. Ultimately, the purpose is to help Hoosier schools and their stakeholders work toward improvement.

With this in mind, Indiana GPS outlines a series of goals and completion dates for the state.

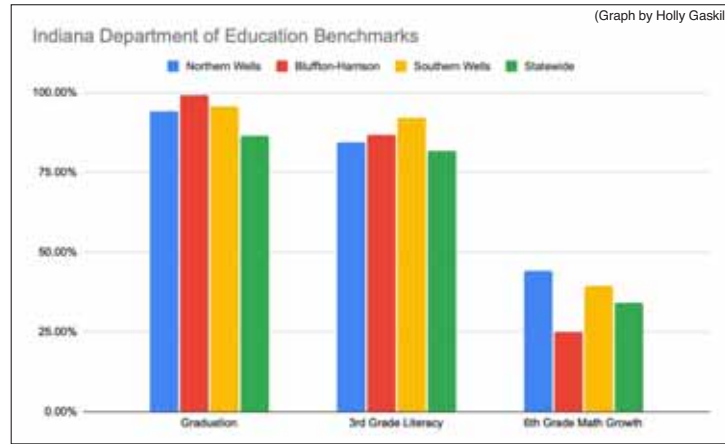
The first data group follows early literacy — a state average of 81.6 percent of third graders met proficiency standards for literacy in 2022, as determined by the IREAD-3. By 2027, the state hopes to have an average of 95 percent of third graders considered proficient.

According to the IDOE's website, students who meet these proficiency standards are 35 percent more likely to graduate high school.

Locally, 84.3 percent of third graders in Northern Wells Community Schools were proficient, 86.6 at Bluffton-Harrison Metropolitan Schools, and 92.1 percent at Southern Wells Community Schools in 2022.

The IDOE also hopes to increase the number of sixth-grade students meeting growth targets on the math ILEARN test to 45.8 percent by 2030. Last year, 34.1 percent of students met "adequate growth."

At the same time, 44.2 percent of sixth grade students at NWCS met this standard, 24.8 percent at BHMSD and 39.3 percent at SWCS.



Looking toward high school and graduation, the IDOE wants to increase the state graduation rate from 86.4 percent to 95 percent by 2030. Additionally, they plan to increase the number of students graduating from college and career credentials from 5.5 percent statewide to 60 percent by 2030.

In 2021, 94 percent of the Norwell High School's senior class completed graduation requirements, and 66.4 percent completed advanced coursework. At Bluffton High School, 99.1 percent of seniors completed graduation requirements, with 81.9 percent completing advanced coursework. Lastly, 95.7 percent of seniors at Southern Wells Junior/Senior High School met graduation requirements, 72.9 percent of whom graduated with advanced coursework.

The dashboard outlines one more area for improvement — the percent of high school graduates employed or enrolled in a school within Indiana one year after graduation — but does not include a target or deadline.

Statewide, 84.9 percent of recent graduates were employed or enrolled in Indiana in 2020. Since 2006, this described 83 percent of graduates on average.

Locally, in 2020, 90.3 percent from NWCS, 85.7 percent from BHMSD, and 86.5 percent from SWCS were employed or enrolled in college or university in Indiana. Trade or vocational schools, as well as military service, were included in enrollment.

Since 2006, NWCS has had an average of 86.1 percent of graduates enrolled or employed one year after graduation, with BHMSD at 86.9 percent and SWCS at 86.2 percent.

The IDOE's website states these goals were identified after receiving feedback from educators, families, communities and employers. At large, they were formed to target the following: academic mastery, career and postsecondary education readiness, communication and collaboration, work ethic, as well as civil, financial, and digital literacy.

Additional data — spanning free and reduced lunch participation to FAFSA completion — is also available on the dashboard. Each category can also be explored by demographics based on gender, economic background, and more.

"In education, you use a lot of charts and graphs and data, and sometimes that is not easily accessible for the average person. And so we really took that to heart," said Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner in a statement to the Indiana Capital Chronicle. "Right now, it's pretty cumbersome for an individual person or educator or a community leader to have to go to each (state or federal) agency to pull that data. This is really putting everything at one place for a school in a transparent way."

The full dashboard is available at indianagps.doe.in.gov ♦

Most county high school grads will seek further training

By **JUSTIN PEEPER**

Wells County's tradition of sending most of its public school graduates on to college will continue this fall as the Class of 2023 moves on to postsecondary education opportunities.

Seven out of every 10 students who graduated from one of Wells County's three public high schools say they will attend college this fall.

Fifty-five percent of Wells County's 2023 high-school graduates indicated they would attend a four-year college, while 17 percent plan to study at a two-year college or enter a technical, trade or vocational educational program.

In Wells County, 255 seniors — 72 percent — have plans to attend two- or four-year colleges this fall. In 2022, 68 percent of graduates from one of Wells County's public high schools said they would attend college.

The News-Banner spoke with guidance department officials at each public

high school in early May and received information on 355 students from the Class of 2023.

School officials cautioned, however, the numbers could change because graduates sometimes change their plans.

According to the data, 55 percent of seniors from the Class of 2023 plan to attend a four-year college. In 2022, 48 percent indicated that they would attend a four-year college.

Seventeen percent of this year's graduates — 60 students — plan to attend two-year colleges or enter a technical, trade, associate, vocational or apprenticeship programs this fall. In 2022, 20 percent of students planned to pursue a two-year degree.

Thirteen graduates — 4 percent —

Where are they going?

Here's a breakdown of what 2022 graduates of Wells County's three public high schools plan to do now that they've graduated:

	4-Year College	2-year College*	Military	Workforce**
Norwell (200 graduates)	111 56%	39 19%	4 2%	46 23%
Bluffton (104 graduates)	57 55%	9 8%	7 7%	31 30%
Southern Wells (51 graduates)	27 53%	12 23%	2 4%	10 20%

*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 schools/The News-Banner

have plans to join the military this year. In 2022, 14 graduates — 4 percent of the county's total graduates — planned to join the military.

The number of students entering the military, however, is actually one more than indicated above. One graduate from Southern Wells High School is going on to college and is enlisting in the Marines. The News-Banner counted him once and

included him in the college-bound group.

Approximately 87 graduates — 24 percent — plan to enter the workforce, fill their time with something else, or are still undecided about their post-secondary plans. Last year, 103 graduates — 28 percent of the county's total graduates — said they would enter the workforce or fill their time doing something else.

Overall, the 2023 graduates' plans are similar to what their peers from previous classes said they would do after graduation. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of graduates from Wells County's public high schools have indicated they would go to college during the time span of 2013-2023 in which The News-Banner has been tracking their plans. ♦

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