

The News - Banner

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2023

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Honoring their service

Pictured above, U.S. Air Force Maj. Cole Hoopingarner was the featured speaker of Norwell middle and high school's Veterans Day program Friday morning, honoring local veterans and encouraging the next generation in service. Hoopingarner is a 2007 graduate of Norwell. At right above, the choir sings an Armed Forces medley. Below, sophomore Grant Tudor plays 'Taps' on the trumpet. The schools also hosted a breakfast for veterans preceding the program. (Photos by Holly Gaskill)



Bluffton man sentenced for child solicitation

By SYDNEY KENT

A Bluffton resident will spend the next three years in prison after he attempted to meet a 13-year-old child for sexual intercourse.

Ronald Comer, 49, was sentenced in the Wells Circuit Court on Wednesday to six years in the Indiana Department of Correction with three years suspended. The sentence was issued after Comer pled guilty to one count of child solicitation, a Level 4 felony, last month.

Comer was one of the first subjects of a series of sting operations in Wells County, arranged by an undercover non-profit called Predator Catchers Indianapolis. Prior to his arrest last November, Comer had never faced any significant issues with the law.

According to his lawyer, Donald Carl Swanson, Comer was a hard-working man. He was a widow, and his wife's death occurred during the time frame of the crime. He held the same job for over a decade until his arrest, raised three children, was close to his parents, and continued to significantly support one of his now adult children.

"If this had never happened," Prosecuting Attorney Timothy Sipe told the court. "It would be reasonable for an individual to believe he was an upstanding and law-abiding citizen. It is the purely detestable nature of his actions that give the state concern moving forward."

According to a probable cause affidavit, Comer responded to a post on a dating app called MeetMe, where a decoy from PCI eventually identified herself as a 13-year-old girl named "Sasha."

Sipe cited this fact in response to Comer's claim that the "victim" in the case greatly facilitated the offense. Comer then continued to request naked photos, send crude and illicit messages, and arrange to meet "Sasha" for sexual acts after he learned of her age.

(Continued on Page 2)

Indiana high court takes on behavioral, mental health crisis

By LESLIE BONILLA MUÑIZ
Indiana Capital Chronicle

The criminal justice system is the primary referrer to substance use disorder treatment and largest provider of mental health care — but the judiciary is doing its part to change that, Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Loretta Rush said Thursday.

"I love the direction the Indiana judiciary is going," she told reporters. "I love the fact that we're working on the behavioral health ... because we'd better do better than 70 percent of people in jail with a substance abuse or mental health issue."

Rush also highlighted a post-pandemic recovery in caseload, changes in technology and transparency and a dragging bar passage rate in its latest annual report.

Tackling behavioral health

She said over her career, she's encountered many a parent grateful for their child's arrest — because through the justice system, the child could access help.

"I think that's problematic," Rush said.

"I think for a long time, like 40 years ago, judges just

(Continued on Page 2)

Jonathan Snyder joins N-B staff

Jonathan Snyder of Bluffton has joined The News-Banner as a full-time reporter.

Snyder graduated in the spring from Cedarville University with a Bachelor's Degree in broadcasting, digital media and journalism. He is originally from Toledo, Ohio, and he moved to Bluffton along with his family in 2019.

At Cedarville, Snyder worked at the campus newspaper for two years, predominantly covering sports. He also worked as a broadcaster for TKDS Sports, a live streaming



Jonathan Snyder



Saluting our veterans

Above, Students at Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School performed several songs and heartfelt speeches during the Veterans Day program to staff, fellow students, and Veterans in attendance Friday morning. At left, Ashley Johnson, the veteran of honor at Bluffton High School's program, gave a speech Friday morning. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

Below, Johnson and Bluffton High School students and faculty saluting during the National Anthem. (Photos by Sydney Kent)



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A sunny and cool weekend in store

Today	Sunday	Monday
High 48	High 54	High 58
Low 31	Low 35	Low 29

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Bluffton man sentenced

(Continued from Page 1)
Comer's defense claimed that not only did he have a low risk of reoffending, it was unlikely that these circumstances would recur. Sipe advised that the state found this to be false, and stated "the internet is everywhere."

"Mr. Comer did go to an adult website, where people over 18 are supposed to have accounts," Judge Kenton Kiracofe stated before he issued his ruling. "He went there believing he was going to meet an adult. Unfortunately, this court has acknowledged some other cases where real juveniles do in fact go on websites and create a fake profile.

That does happen."

This was the case for a minor victim from Bluffton whose abuser was convicted in the Wells Circuit Court earlier this year. Brian Randy Vanauken, 41, Fort Wayne, was sentenced to 69 years in prison after a jury found him guilty on 16 charges for child molesting, exploitation, and sex trafficking.

"This person told Mr. Comer that she was a minor," Kiracofe concluded. "That should have been enough for Mr. Comer to say he isn't interested any longer, and move on, but he didn't. He outlined what was going to happen in a text

message with this person."

Swanson pointed out that Comer assisted in the investigation and admitted to the allegations the same day that he was arrested. He claimed Comer was cooperative throughout the case.

However, during his change of plea hearing last month, Comer attempted to deflect responsibility and deny that he understood the decoy's age when the state presented a factual basis for the charge.

Some surrounding counties refuse to file charges from or investigate subjects from PCI investigations, with concerns of entrapment as a potential defense

in court. Comer's defense explained why he did not use this as his argument.

"(The claims) were not made by a law enforcement agency, but by a private agency," Swanson stated. "I think there's no way I can argue entrapment. The court and state and I all appreciate that pedophilia is incurable."

After the sentence was issued, Comer was immediately taken into custody by the Wells County Sheriff's Department. He is ordered to complete a period of probation following his incarceration and pay court costs and filing fees.

sydney@news-banner.com

Behavioral health crisis

(Continued from Page 1)
decided the case then got out the door," she said. "Now we're saying, 'We're players in our community.' I tell judges, 'you've got a superpower.'"

She said Indiana has trained its judges on substance abuse and mental health, with best practices for different people: children, pregnant women, and so on.

And judges are encouraged to be proactive: to find ways to divert people away from the system and toward resources.

Rush additionally offered 988 as an effective strategy.

The national suicide and crisis hotline is an alternative to 911's traditional police and fire response. It launched in July.

Indiana has put \$133.6 million in federal funds, along with \$100 million in its latest biennial budget, into the hotline. Lawmakers considered — but didn't add — a fee on cell phones that would fund 988 similarly to 911.

"I love 988," Rush said. "And I would love to see permanent funding for 988."

She said the hotline means that crisis intervention teams respond to

behavioral health crises "as opposed to handcuffs and incarceration."

The court also brought together about 800 people from every Hoosier county during a mental health summit last October, according to the report.

Rush noted that those local units also have more financial resources for substance use help through the state's opioid settlement with manufacturers and distributors.

Caseload, cameras and exam-passers

Cases are back on the rise after a pandemic-era drop, according to the report.

The court in 2022 received 717 cases and disposed of 693, as opposed to the 634 received and 633 disposed of the year prior. But that's still down from previous totals in the 800s and 900s.

It also oversaw changes in technology and access — most notably, ditching a blanket ban on cameras in courtrooms in favor of allowing judges to decide for their own courtrooms.

Additionally, parties to cases can now also access documents online in their own proceedings. Lawyers have had that added access since 2017.

And the court's staff is hard at work on a massive jail management system integrating data from across the state, although they've hit some snags.

"It is the biggest project we've ever taken on," Rush said of the system, dubbed INjail. And it's likely years away from going live and public, according to court spokeswoman Kathryn Dolan.

Additional courts in 2022 joined a separate case management pilot that aims to speed up simple cases and allow more time to complex cases. That year, three counties — Marion, Monroe and Vigo — began piloting text message reminders in certain family cases.

But the state's severe attorney shortage saw little improvement in the report: 389 of 617 applicants passed the bar exam in 2022, or 63 percent. That's down from 2021's 65 percent, but slightly up from previous rates closer to 60 percent.

Passage rates peaked in 2020, but technical complications during the pandemic-era remote exam meant it was open-book and without any live monitoring or proctoring, according to a court order.

Snyder joins N-B

(Continued from Page 1)
service covering local high school sports around the Dayton, Ohio area.

For The News-Banner, Snyder will start covering Bluffton city government later this month, in addition

to general reporting for the county.

"We're happy to have Jon join our staff," Editor Holly Gaskill said. "Jon brings an attention to detail and passion for reporting that will benefit our coverage of

Bluffton well as he begins in his new beat."

"I'm really excited to get started at the Banner," Jonathan said. "Any time you have a close deep-knit community like Bluffton has, there are always special sto-

ries to tell. I cannot wait to start serving the community here."

In his free time, Snyder enjoys cheering on the Ohio State Buckeyes and finding new hats for his collection.

Weather

Saturday, November 11, 2023
(24-hour observations at 8:47 p.m. Friday)
High: 54; Low: 38; Precipitation: None
Wabash River Level (at the Main Street bridge): 1.18 feet at 8:45 p.m. Friday

Wells County forecast

Today: Sunny, with a high near 48. Northwest wind around 5 mph becoming northeast in the afternoon.

Tonight: Partly cloudy, with a low around 31. East wind around 5 mph.

Sunday: Sunny, with a high near 54. Southeast wind 5 to 10 mph.

Sunday Night: Clear, with a low around 35. Southwest wind 5 to 10 mph.

Monday: Sunny, with a high near 58.

Monday Night: Mostly clear, with a low around 29.

Tuesday: Sunny, with a high near 56.

Tuesday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 33.

Wednesday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 60.

Wednesday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 40.

Thursday: Partly sunny, with a high near 62.

Thursday Night: A chance of showers. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 46.

Friday: A chance of showers. Partly sunny, with a high near 59.



Elected Indiana president

Bluffton auctioneer Isaac Stoller, left, was installed as the 2023-24 president of the Indiana Auctioneers Association at the group's annual meeting Nov. 4. "I'm deeply honored and thrilled," Stoller said in a news release, "and I look forward to working to promote and advance our industry." He is accepting the president's gavel from outgoing president, Marc Huber of Greenfield. (Photo provided)

96-year-old Korean War veteran still trying to get Purple Heart medal after 7 decades

ST. PETER, Minn. (AP) — Earl Meyer remembers in vivid detail when his platoon came under heavy fire during the Korean War -- he still has shrapnel embedded in his thigh.

But over 70 years later, the 96-year-old is still waiting for the U.S. Army to recognize his injury and to award him a Purple Heart medal, which honors service members wounded or killed in combat.

Meyer has provided the Army with documents to back up his assertion that he was wounded in combat in June 1951. Doctors at the Department of Veterans Affairs agreed that his account of the shrapnel coming from a mortar attack was probably true. But few men in his unit who would have witnessed the battle have survived, and he thinks the medic who treated him on the battlefield was killed before he could file the paperwork.

An Army review board in April issued what it called a final rejection of Meyer's request for a Purple Heart, citing insufficient documentation. His case highlights how it can be a struggle for wounded veterans to get medals they've earned when the fog of war, the absence of records and the passage of time make it challenging to produce proof.

"At first I didn't know that I had been wounded," Meyer wrote in a sworn statement that was part of his rejected appeal. "But as my unit advanced from where the mortar rounds were hitting, I noticed that my pants were sticking to my leg. I reached down to correct this and discovered that my hand was covered in blood."

Meyer took the rare step of suing the Department of Defense and the Army in September. The Army's Office of Public Affairs said it doesn't comment on

ongoing litigation. But after The Associated Press made requests for comment on Meyer's case, the office of the Army's top noncommissioned officer, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer, said that it's going to take another look.

"The Sergeant Major of the Army's Office is engaging with Mr. Meyer's family and looking into the situation," spokesperson Master Sgt. Daniel Wallace said. "Either way, we're proud of Mr. Meyer's service to our country."

Meyer said in an interview that he wouldn't have pursued the Purple Heart because his injuries were relatively minor compared to those of many men he served with, but his three daughters persuaded him. Growing up, they knew that he had been injured in the war, but like many veterans, he never talked much about it. It's only been in the past decade or so that he's opened up to them, which led them to urge his

pursuit of a Purple Heart.

"I think it will provide closure for him. I really do," said his daughter, Sandy Baker, of New Buffalo, Michigan.

Tony Cross, a disability claims and appeals specialist with the American Legion, the country's largest veterans' service organization, said the Legion doesn't commonly see cases like Meyer's of medals denied, though it did see one earlier this year. The process is challenging because each military branch has its own approval process and it gets more challenging after a veteran leaves the military, he said.

Meyer's main obstacle has been the lack of paperwork. He told the AP the medic who bandaged his leg told him he would file the forms to show he was wounded in combat. But he never did. Meyer thinks the medic may have been killed in action. Only a few members of his platoon made it out unharmed.



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HOSPICE

OBITUARIES

Sam Shafer, 35

Sam Shafer, 35, originally of Ossian, passed away on Oct. 31, 2023, in Fishers, Ind.

He was born on Jan. 11, 1988. Sam's abiding passion since his youth was history. He loved discovering new facts, and he shared his knowledge through his knack for engaging storytelling. This passion and his abundant creativity served him well during his employment at Conner Prairie role-playing a Civil War soldier. His favorite days on the job were those spent teaching history to kids. Blending his love of history with his fascination with coin collecting, Sam then pursued a career as a numismatist. After getting his start in other people's coin shops, Sam branched out on his entrepreneurial adventure with Sam Shafer Numismatics. It was a business into which he poured his heart and soul.

Sam will be remembered as a quick wit, great writer, music lover, inspired entrepreneur, and a cat papa. He will also be remembered for his laugh, mischievous



twinkle in his eye and numerous acts of generosity.

Surviving family include his father, Philip Shafer; brother, Patrick Shafer; aunt and uncle, Sally and Steve Bracke; uncle, John Holzinger; uncle and aunt, Tom Shafer and Susan Parrish; and his cousins, Marissa Bracke, Alex (Jilayne Willhoite) Bracke, Charles Bracke, and Joe (Leslie) Shafer.

He was preceded in death by his mother, Mary Shafer; uncle, L. Lamont Humbracht; and his grandparents, Loyal and Lorraine Humbracht.

No service will be held. A private celebration of life gathering for the family will happen at a later date. Memorials may be made to Conner Prairie (www.connerprairie.org) or American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org). Elzey-Patterson-Rodak Funeral Home, Ossian is handling arrangements. Condolences and memories can be left online at www.elzey-patterson-rodak.com.

Bluffton Parks & Rec News & Notes



By Brandy Fiechter

Destination Recreation

Congratulations to Finn Brackin for winning the Bluffton Parks Department's Virtual Costume Contest! His adorable homemade train engine costume stole the hearts of 214 voters. We want to thank everyone who participated in the contest; we loved seeing all the creative costumes.

We would also like to congratulate Landen Lautzenheiser for being the first child to find **Walter the Wandering Turkey** at Pickett's Run Park. Keep an eye on the Bluffton Parks Department's Facebook page to see when Walter will be hiding again in one of the city parks.

It was a beautiful day last Saturday for our annual **WOOF trail run** for the 132 runners who participated in the race. To view the race results, visit <http://www.ERunner.biz/results>.

For those who want to keep active over the winter months, we are now accepting registration for the **Wells Winter 100-Mile Challenge**. Whatever your fitness goals are for 2024, this challenge will help you build and maintain a solid base while reinforcing good habits and consistency through group accountability and motivation. All you need is an average of just under 10 miles a week.

The price of the challenge is only \$25.00, and you will receive:

- Access to our Strava group, where you can log your miles and view the leaderboard. (Note: You can also submit your miles via email)
- Long Sleeve Wells 100 Challenge T-Shirt
- Medal if you complete 100 miles by March 31.
- Chances to win additional prizes and discounts by submitting photos and comments on Strava or the Wells Winter 100 Challenge Facebook Page. To sign up, visit <https://tinyurl.com/35ce9bwz>.

Mark your calendars for the next **Theater Thursday** on Nov. 16.

We will be showing the movie "Fatherhood," rated PG13. Bluffton Parks and Recreation Department and Wells County Public Library have partnered to offer adults a free monthly movie. The film "Fatherhood," will be shown at 10 a.m. at the Wells County Public Library. This year-round event is on the third Thursday of every month.

Coloring contests were dropped off at the area schools last week and will be due by Dec. 15 for a chance to win a giant toy and candy-filled stocking. If you need an extra copy, visit the City Website at <https://tinyurl.com/4sbuk7c7>.

Be sure to sign your child up for the **Free Indoor Foam Snowball Fight**. The event will be held on Tuesday, Dec. 5, from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at the Bluffton City Gym for Children ages 6-16. This awesome indoor snowball fight game lets you challenge your friends without getting chilly in the cold. Please pre-register your child by emailing events@blufftonindiana.gov or call 824-6069.

It's about that time of year when **Santa's Mailbox** shows up in front of City Hall for the children in Wells County to write to the jolly old elf. The Bluffton Parks Department is happy to deliver your child's letter to Santa between Nov. 22 and Dec. 8. Each child will receive a personalized letter back with a small gift enclosed. Please ensure that the child's name and address are clearly marked on the outside of the envelope. This is a free service, and no postage is needed.

We want to thank the Lions Club for purchasing and planting a beautiful Tulip tree at Lion's Park this week. We appreciate their generosity in caring for this park.

Have a great week!

Local Roundup

Friends of the Shelter will meet Monday afternoon

Friends of the Shelter, the organization that provides support for the Wells County Animal Shelter, will meet at 5:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 13, in the meeting room on the first floor of Bluffton City Hall, 128 E. Market St. Items on the agenda include financial reports, reports on recent events and planning for upcoming events.

Ossian Town Council will meet Monday evening

The Ossian Town Council will meet at 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 13, at the Ossian Town Hall, 507 N. Jefferson St. in Ossian. Topics on the agenda will include:

- Department reports from the fire department, police commission and park board.
- A review of the stand-alone agreement for the design of Melching and Millside Court.
- New business, including approval of the 2024 holiday schedule, adoption of section 2 of the Crosswinds Lakes addition, the appointment of a member to the Area Plan Commission, and discussion of employee gift cards and salary.
- Personnel and financial matters

Regional Sewer District board will meet Monday

The board of the Wells County Regional Sewer District will meet at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 13, in Room 105, the multi-purpose room on the lower level of the Wells Carnegie Government Annex, 223 W. Washington St. Topics on the agenda include:

- Project status updates from Liberty Center/Murray, Craigville, Kingsland and Tocsin.
- General project updates, customer questions, and financial matters.
- Approval of 2024 meeting dates.

Wells County SWCD board will meet Tuesday morning

The board of the Wells County Soil and Water Conservation District will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 14, in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Service Center at 117 W. Harvest Road in Bluffton. Agenda items will include discussion regarding the annual meeting and conference.

Bluffton Board of Works to meet Tuesday afternoon

The Bluffton Board of Public Works and Safety will meet at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 14, in the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall, 128 E. Market St. Topics on the agenda include:

- Financial matters
- Previous business, including discussion of a water line and awarding of bids for the Lancaster Park pickleball courts and exten-

sion of the Interurban Trail.

- New business, including approval purchase pool chemicals, Parks Department transfers, discussion of 2024 medical and dental rates, and compost site permits.

Norwell school board will meet Tuesday evening

The board of the Norwell Community Schools will meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 14, at Norwell High School, 1100E. U.S. 224. Topics on the agenda include:

- Personnel and financial matters
- Acceptance of donations
- Field trip requests
- A report from Superintendent Mike Springer, including the Ossian Rotary Youth Exchange program, update regarding the Educational Resources Reconsideration Commission and pool floor maintenance, and a quarterly financial report.
- 2024-25 meeting dates
- Action items, including the 2023-25 Collective Bargaining Agreement, acceptance of the SEBT Trust Document and Bylaws, Reconsideration Committee Recommendations, and December through June board meeting dates.

A strategic planning meeting will directly follow the regular agenda items to discuss 2023-24 SWOT analysis and participation groups.

Wells County Public Library board will meet Tuesday

The board of the Wells County Public Library will meet at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 14, in the meeting room of the main library, 200 W. Washington St. Topics on the agenda will include:

- Librarian's and treasurer's reports.
- Financial matters.
- A staff report of the Children's Book Festival.
- Committee reports regarding the building, budget, policy and bylaws, public awareness and outreach, nominating, and director evaluation.
- New business, including policy changes for 2024, health insurance and library hours.
- Updates from Director Sarah MacNeill.

Markle Town Council will meet Wednesday evening

The Markle Town Council will meet at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 15, in the meeting room of the Markle fire station, 150 W. Sparks St. in Markle.

County Election Board will meet Friday afternoon

The Wells County Election Board will meet at 2 p.m. Friday, Nov. 17, in the clerk's office in the Wells County Courthouse, 102 W. Market St. to confirm the results of the election.

Rep. Bob Cherry won't seek reelection, ending 25 years in seat

By LESLIE BONILLA MUÑIZ
Indiana Capital Chronicle

Rep. Bob Cherry announced Friday he won't seek reelection in 2024, retiring after serving out his current term.

The Greenfield Republican will have served in Indiana's House of Representatives for 25 years — since 1998. His district, 53, includes parts of Hancock and Madison counties.

"During my time in the legislature, our state's national economic momentum and outlook rankings have gone from near the bottom of nearly every recognized list to at or near the top," Cherry said in a news release.

"We also turned budget deficits into structurally balanced budgets with healthy reserves, which protect against future economic downturns," he continued. "I'm grateful to have been part of Indiana's success story and for the strong conservative leadership that helped propel us to where we are today."

Cherry co-authored the state's latest biennial budget. The \$44 billion bill speeds up an existing individual income tax cut timeline,

which Cherry said would save taxpayers \$430 million over the next two years. He co-authored the original timeline in 2022.

He also touted the budget's increase funding for K-12 education and elimination of textbook and curricular fees for parents.

"Bob is an integral member of our team as he brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table, particularly when it comes to working on budgeting matters," House Speaker Todd Huston said. "He also approaches tough issues with Hoosier common sense, and keeps the needs of his constituents and local communities top of mind."

Cherry additionally co-authored a controversial law this year cracking down on the state's pension investment managers. But his legislative attempt to give retirees a 13th check was unsuccessful.

Last year, he supported a contentious bill banning transgender girls from playing on girls K-12 sports teams at public schools; in the release, he said the move protected integrity and fairness.

"It's been a great privi-

lege and honor to serve Hancock and Madison counties as well as portions of Rush and Shelby counties under the prior legislative district maps," Cherry said. "I've been blessed to represent our area of the state and I'm so thankful for everyone who supported me along the way."

Huston said he looked forward to serving alongside Cherry during his final year and "wish(ed) him the absolute best in retirement."

Cherry is one of three long-serving GOP lawmakers to announce retirement plan this fall. Two others resigned early, prompting party insiders to select replacements. And one, Sen. Jack Sandlin of Indianapolis, died unexpectedly in September.

VISITATION & SERVICES

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Calling: 12 - 3 p.m. Sunday, November 12. Service: 3 p.m., Sunday, November 12 at the funeral home.

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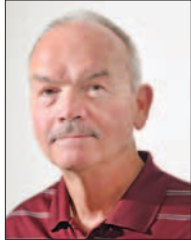
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'Finding Gen. Barnes' – It might make a good movie

Sometimes the hunt is the most fun part.

Saturday's Sub



Mark Miller

That actually comes across as a little crude, but the point is, finding a person can be as enjoyable as sitting down and talking to them.

We've had some occasional stories about Wells County natives who have gone on to successful military careers and experiences. When Mike Stohler was promoted to general a couple years ago (already!), there was some speculation as to whether there had been any others. The name of Charles Barnes surfaced relatively early, but my efforts to find any information on him went nowhere.

The good news was that when you asked Mrs. Google for "Charles Barnes Bluffton Indiana" or variations of that, no obituaries popped up. Someone then shared they thought he was once the commander of the same outfit Stohler had led, the 122nd Fighter Wing in Fort Wayne. An email sent to the unit's public information officer got no response. An internet search adding that information got a birthday, which turned out to be correct, and a one-sentence bio: "Charles Barnes spent 64 years and 5 months in the Indiana Air National Guard and retired with the rank of Brigadier General." While the rank was correct, the years of service, which calculates that he would have retired just five years ago at the age of 83, was not.

After a long dry spell of no new leads, another conversation revealed that Gen. Barnes had grown up in Petroleum, and then a few weeks later that he might be related to Chip Mann's wife. It took me a few weeks to find a mutual acquaintance who had Chip's contact information. An added twist: Chip has a "gmail.com" address with which "news-banner.com" addresses seem to have a communication problem. But, glory be, Chip answered promptly that Mr. Barnes is indeed *his* uncle (his mother's brother) and he would pass the message along.

I need to mention that, having served in the Army, I have this image of a general: Tall, ramrod straight. Gruff, all business. Imposing. Intimidating. I wasn't sure how I would handle interviewing a retired, presumably crusty general.

I had given Chip my cell phone number. It rang a couple days later with an unfamiliar number displayed. As usual, it went unanswered but I quickly listened to the message that had been left.

"Hi, this is Charlie Barnes. Understand you're trying to get a hold of me. Call me back."

Charlie? A general calls himself Charlie? And it was a friendly voice. Perhaps because he turned out to be a very friendly person, blowing my stereotype out of the water.

The "hunt" had lasted, I think, well over a year. What fun to call him back, discover he lives in Fort Wayne and arrange a meeting — one which stretched out to well over a couple hours. That was fun, I hope as displayed in Friday's Veterans Day salute to one of Wells County's offspring that "done good." But finding him was fun, too.

Two additional notes on his crash and safe ejection over his home territory:

— I don't know a whole lot about flying, but it strikes me that Charlie never got proper credit for his pilot skills. He managed to aim a disabled plane away from Montpelier and towards an open field. And then had the presence of mind to remember his training and "roll on the wing" in order to improve his odds for surviving the ejection, all the while maintaining the plane's direction towards that open field.

— How many people from Wells County can say they've seen their name on the front page of the New York Times?

After hearing his story about his crash near Fiat, it occurred to me that I would find those clippings in some too-often-forgotten files at the N-B. During the 1960s, '70s and into the '80s, Gene McCord had faithfully taken each day's edition, clipped out stories and pictures and filed them away. Sure enough, there was an envelope with "Barnes, Charles" typed in the upper left corner. It included clippings of his promotion to general, his retirement announcement, and two stories about the crash. A gold mine.

And then Friday morning, one of our newer part-time employees told me that he has a number of photos from Charlie's career. Turns out Steve Poulson was the 122nd Wing's staff photographer for about 20 years.

"He's a great guy," Steve shared. "A great sense of humor." Although he did not know Charlie's whereabouts now, "I could have found out," he said.

There is likely some kind of analogy or lesson here. I'd been looking for my "prey" for a number of months. The information about him was in the same building and he was living only a half-hour or so away.

Life can be like that.

miller@news-banner.com



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A Veteran's Day Salute

Editor's Note: Every time I hear the word "veteran," there is one particular person that comes to mind. Every time. I didn't get to know Gary Books until after I'd come to the News-Banner in 1997 and then after he retired from Fort Wayne Newspapers. Not sure what year that was. He told me once that he had offered me a job when he was working for Nixon Newspapers, based in Peru. I was the ad manager for the Decatur paper at the time. I'd forgotten about it, but after some prodding, the conversation at a state press association meeting finally rang a bell. So technically, we had met before.

Longtime Blufftonites will recall that Gary was the News-Banner's sports editor from 1970 to 1977. The Bluffton native and 1964 Lancaster grad had studied journalism at Indiana University before being drafted.

He served in Vietnam, That's an understatement. He was a Ranger. He earned four Purple Hearts. The aftereffects of those combat injuries would stay with him for the rest of his life, most noticeably by his pronounced limp. Although I do not think it was ever certified, I am convinced his premature death at the age of 61 in 2006 was the result of his exposure to Agent Orange.

But I do not recall him ever complaining.

I was blessed to then work with him for about five or six years towards the end of his life. It was a part-time gig for him. He sold some ads and wrote some stories and columns for us. He was simply a good guy. A guy who valiantly served his country. He put his life at risk. He was "the" veteran.

He wrote this essay and poem very early in his News-Banner career. The memories were obviously quite fresh. We published this as part of a Veterans Day salute sometime after his passing. A month or so ago, a reader brought by a copy and suggested we might re-print it for Veterans Day this year. Excellent idea. Thank you, Mike Sutton.

— Mark Miller



The Bunker

After the platoon had been out in the field for several days and returned to our support base for a shower, hot food and rest, some of us who had been in South Vietnam for a while would gather around a bunker that was in the middle of our platoon's defensive area.

We'd talk about the girl back home, strawberry pie, our families and our dreams for the future. We'd also talk about the war.

A soldier new to South Vietnam always would join us; you could tell he was new because his hair still would be cut short — a requirement of the training camps back in the States.

The new guy would usually listen intently as we talked about the war and our experiences, hoping to learn something that might save his life.

In the poem that follows, the new guy at the bunker on this night stunned the rest of us by expressing his thoughts. What you're about to read is true, the words have been shuffled and changed a little so they rhyme.

The Bunker

We used to sit around the bunker at night
And we'd often talk about an earlier fight.
And Always a new guy would join us there,
We could tell he was new by his close-cropped hair.

One night, a new guy said to me, as he began with a
flinch

"You know yesterday, Sarge, I came within an inch
of losin' my life.
I raised my head up and a bullet grazed my steel pot
And they started comin' in and for a second I froze and
forgot
All the hand-to-hand combat I'd been taught.
I wanted to get up and I almost ran
But instead I stood and fought the best that I can.
And you know yesterday, Sarge, I killed my first man."

*The rest of us in the bunker that night had been in
South Vietnam a long time. We'd all gone through the
same thing as the new guy, but had just never been able
to talk about it. And so it struck us as kind of strange,*

*actually kind of funny, that a new guy could. So, we all
just laughed about that.*

And he said, "Sarge, you remember Larry Wright,
The one who got his foot shot off?
When he got home he wrote someone here
That his wife had run off
With some other guy, I guess he had two feet.
And you remember Ronnie Lipscomb, that day in the
mud?"

He tripped that booby trap and man,
I've never seen so much blood.
I didn't know, I thought he was dyin'
So I turned and started to walk away
So he wouldn't see me cryin'.
I looked at him and I just couldn't take it no more
And I wanted to go out and kill every man, woman,
child and every slant-eyed whore
in that God-forsaken land.
He reached both hands up in the air,
and you know, Sarge, I'm just a dumb clod,
But never before had I ever heard
Anyone prayin' like that, to God."

*The rest of us in the bunker that night had been in
South Vietnam a long time. When Larry and Ron got
hurt, we were bothered by it, too. But we'd just never
been able to talk about it. So it struck us as kind of
strange, actually kind of funny, that a new guy could.
So we all just laughed about that.*

Now that I'm home and safe and sound
And don't have to worry about any more rounds
Come whistling over my head,
I think about Johnny Mike, and little Georgia-born Ed
Crazy ol' Tex, and Sergeant Beetle Bailey Fred.
I'd like to say they made it home all right too, but I
can't,
'Cause you see, they're all dead.
I'm the only one left from the bunker that night
And even though I've tried with all my might,
I just can't laugh about that.

Gary Books
February 1970

Virginia, Ohio and abortion

Elections, especially in Virginia and Ohio, should convince pro-life Republicans of their need to come up with a different strategy when it comes to abortion. A no-exceptions mandate, or strictly limiting the procedure isn't working, in part because a new generation of younger people seem less predisposed to curtailing it.

Instead of being put on the defensive for pregnancies due to rape, incest or the life of the mother, Republicans and pro-lifers need to go on the offensive. USA Today has reported that according to the Guttmacher Institute, "Just one percent of women obtain an abortion because they became pregnant through rape, and less than 0.5% do so because of incest."

Those who are pro-life need to do a better job of portraying the other side as the real radicals. They mostly oppose any restrictions on abortion. Pro-lifers should continue to work to protect the lives of the unborn at earlier stages. Aren't more than 60 million U.S. abortions since 1973 enough? Are people not concerned about the decline in America's birth rate?

Back to politics. In Virginia, Gov.



Cal Thomas

Glenn Youngkin, who has been seen by some as a possible alternative to Donald Trump in the presidential contest, had campaigned hard to hold on to the slim Republican majority in the state house and flip the Democrat's slim majority in the state Senate. He and Republicans lost both houses, dooming most of his agenda for his last two years in office, as well as his proposal to limit abortions to 15 weeks.

Redistricting in Virginia did not help Youngkin's cause. On top of the usual large turnout by Democrats in Northern Virginia, Richmond and other high population cities, the redrawing of district lines favored Democrats. It's fair to say that any hope of a Youngkin presidential candidacy next year is dead, if it ever was alive because he eschewed any talk of running until the election was over. It's now over and with filing deadlines rapidly approaching in some states, it appears over for him in 2024.

There are calls from some Republicans for RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel to resign because of continuing Republican losses, but she is not the

main problem. Too many Republicans are reluctant to talk about abortion because they appear unsure or uncomfortable with their positions. The other side is anything but uncomfortable. They are deeply committed to fighting for "a woman's right to choose" and their convictions appear to be overwhelming the pro-life position.

We live in an anti-life and increasingly lawless culture. When I was young, newspapers buried most crime stories on inside pages because there was so little of it. The rare murder made it to the front page and was the lead story on local TV. Today, even when there are multiple murders in big cities, they barely get our attention because we have become so inured to violence.

I see abortion increasingly as a reflection of our deepening decadence at many levels. It's not the main cause of our moral decline. That means it must be dealt with at a deeper level than politics.

As expected, Democrats are celebrating their victories. It appears they will make abortion a central issue in the 2024 presidential campaign. Perhaps, Republicans should keep the focus, not on abortion, but rather on President Biden's sagging poll numbers.

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Stuck announces run for 2024 Wells County Recorder

Rina Stuck of Bluffton has announced her candidacy for Wells County Recorder.

Stuck has previously held the position for two terms, 2008-2012 and 2012-2016, before reaching her term limits. She then worked under her former deputy and current Recorder Carolyn Bertsch until March of 2020 when she was appointed as Chief Deputy Recorder in Adams County. She has over 20 years of experience in total.

Recognizing her early announcement to the Republican primaries, Stuck told the News-Banner she wanted to announce her campaign early to begin conversations the next chapter of the Wells County Recorder's Office. Bertsch has reached her term limit and a new recorder will be elected in 2024.

In a press release announcing her candidacy, Stuck said, "The love I have for Indiana's first constitutional county office speaks with my years of experience in not one but two county Recorder's Offices. I have a passion for public service, and I take great pride in being a public servant. I've developed an admiration for what the Recorder's office contributes to the history of our county and the state. Being held accountable for the work the office does and having a good quality working relationship with the other county offices, commissioners and county council is high importance to me as we are all there to serve the taxpayer."

Citing her experience, Stuck said she wants to modernize the processes of the Wells County Recorder's Office, improving workflow and utilizing technology to better serve the community. Specifically, Stuck said she wants

to digitize and index older microfilm records.

Stuck said the importance of this work was proved during the pandemic, where recordings were at their all-time highest. "With the knowledge I have gained while working in Adams County, I am confident that I can implement the changes needed, which will utilize the software and workflow of the office to create an efficiency to the Wells County Recorder's office that will take it to the next

level," Stuck added.

In 2013 during Stuck's second term she received the Indiana Recorders Association Outstanding Recorders Service Award, was honored in 2015 with being Association of Indiana Counties Recorder of the Year. She has also served on boards and leadership for the Recorders Association Education Committee, Recorder's Legislation Committee, and Association of Indiana Counties. She is also an alumni of the Richard G. Lugar Excellence in Public Service Series. Locally, Stuck serves with the Bluffton Street Fair Board, Friends of the Shelter and Wells County Republicans.



Rina Stuck



Lions Club plants donates tree

The Bluffton Lions Club recently donated and planted a new tulip tree at Lion's Park. Pictured left to right are Karen Harrold, Karen Ottjes, Jim Ottjes, Jerry Ziegler, Sandy Zeigler and Dean Engle. (Photo submitted)



Pictured in the photo from left are Wells County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Erin Prible, Jasmine Spriggle of State Farm-Erin Daugherty, Kevin Sills of Farm Bureau Insurance, Erin Daugherty of State Farm-Erin Daugherty, Danielle Thompson of Flagstar Bank, Casey Robbins of F&M Bank, Steve Higgins of Anthony Wayne Area Council BSA, Keith Muhlenkamp of First Merchants Bank, Katty Navarajo and Norma Alicia Nowarajo of Tienda Mexicana La Katty, Ben Renkenberger of United Way of Wells County, Lizzandro Sosa of Tienda Mexicana La Katty, Nick Huffman of Steffen Group, Erica Lehman of Coldwell Banker-Holloway, Heather Morgan of National Oil & Gas, Angie Topp of Thrive Mortgage of Special Events, Katie Stauffer of Parlor City Cabinetry and Chandler Gerber of the City of Bluffton. (Photo submitted)

Tienda Mexicana La Katty joins downtown Bluffton, bringing authentic flavors and culture

The Wells County Chamber of Commerce is thrilled to announce the arrival of Tienda Mexicana La Katty, a vibrant addition to downtown Bluffton, located at 202 W. Market Street. To mark the occasion, a ribbon-cutting celebration was organized by the Chamber's staff and Ambassadors.

Owner, Norma Alicia Nowarajo, is a native of Matamoros Tamaulipas, Mexico, has proudly introduced Tienda Mexicana La Katty to provide an array of grocery items and supplies hailing from both Mexico and Guatemala. Her passion for preserving her culture and catering to the needs of the community has inspired this exciting venture.

Norma's multicultural background and strong family ties have played a significant role in shaping Tienda Mexicana La Katty. "My parents are from Mexico, and my husband is from Guatemala, so we had to make sure we offered food and supplies from both areas," said Norma. "Family is very important to me. We wanted to fill a need in our community for products that are related to our culture."

The store's name carries a special significance as it is named after Norma's daughter, emphasizing the importance of family throughout this endeavor. The store aims to bring a piece of home to Wells County, making cultural products more accessible to the local population.

Tienda Mexicana La Katty offers a diverse range

of products, including grocery staples, beauty items, and household essentials. One of their specialties is sweet bread, a beloved treat in their culture, perfect for pairing with coffee. Additionally, the store provides assistance for sending money back home to Mexico, with Norma utilizing her experience as a translator to help customers navigate the system and answer any questions they may have.

Bilingual in Spanish and English, Norma is dedicated to fostering a sense of community and unity. "My main goal is to connect with my Hispanic roots and get other Hispanics in our community to know that we are here to help. I want people to know that I am here to assist you, no matter your culture or religion."

Tienda Mexicana La Katty also tantalizes taste buds with special authentic Mexican food every Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., offering a taste of their restaurant experience from Texas. With a hopeful eye on the future, Norma envisions expanding her offerings into a restaurant and a butcher store, setting her aspirations on long-term growth.

Operating hours for Tienda Mexicana La Katty are Monday through Friday: 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturdays: 10:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., and Sundays: 10:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Norma and her team are excited to welcome the community to experience the rich flavors and warm hospitality at Tienda Mexi-

cana La Katty. This new establishment promises to be a hub for cultural connection and community support.

Arnold Lumber Co.
425 S. Winchester St., Decatur, IN
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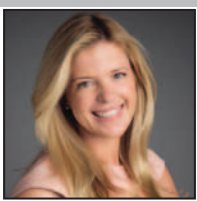
Find us at 1220 S. Main Street, Bluffton
Monday thru Friday 10am-6pm
And Saturday 11am-4pm
Across from (A Perfect Blend Flower Shop)

Dragged down by husband's drinking

Dear Annie: My husband and I have been married for 36 years, together for 40. He suffers from anxiety and depression and has chosen alcohol as his drug of choice.

care on his own, now is the time for a serious intervention. Between you and your children, hopefully an ultimatum will make him finally come to terms with how detrimental his addiction has become.

Dear Annie by Annie Lane



Rehabilitation first and, eventually, marriage counseling second, if he is willing to commit to bettering your relationship. With all this going on, you might consider seeking out your local Al-Anon chapter for support.

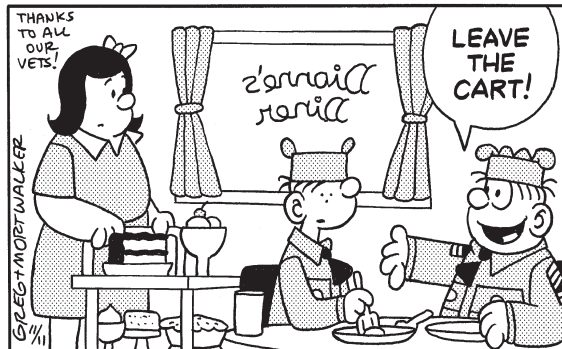
Dear Annie: I am writing regarding "No Visits for Nana," the elderly woman whose adult daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren live two hours away and almost never visit.

"Nana" needs to consider selling her home and moving into adult/assisted living. She can do this near where she currently resides or closer to her family.

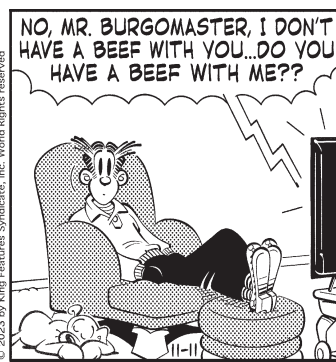
Dear Champion: I wholeheartedly agree with you. If "Nana" doesn't have much tying her down to her current community, a move, when and if feasible, is a no-brainer.

Send your questions for Annie Lane to dearannie@creators.com. © 2023 CREATORS.COM

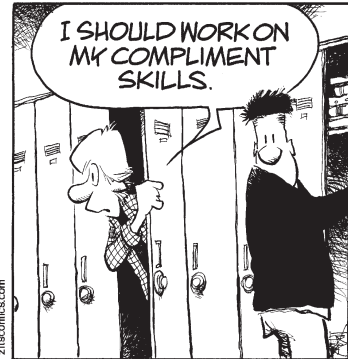
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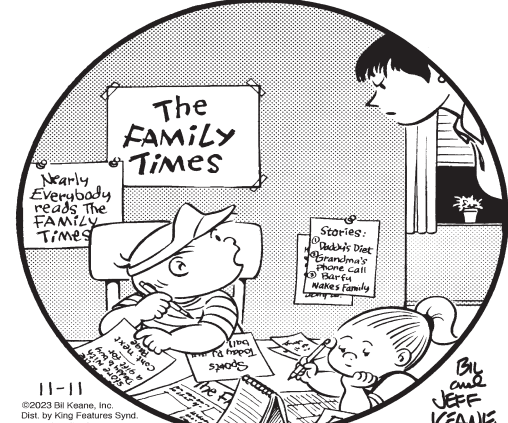


CRANKSHAFT



THE FAMILY CIRCUS

By Bil Keane The LOCKHORNS



My Answer

By Dr. Billy Graham



Evil has been present in the world from the moment sin invaded God's perfect world

Q: This world is getting worse by the day. There is so much hatred, anger, and rage. It has even become dangerous to go to church these days.

ever hearing about bad news. But the Bible says that in the final days before Jesus returns to this earth there will be "terrible times."

Does this mean that we can never make any progress against the massive problems that assail society? No, of course not; God wants us to fight evil wherever it is found.

A: Evil has been present in the world from the moment sin invaded God's perfect world. Wars have raged around the world from the beginning of time.

Our world is filled with hatred, anger, conflict, turmoil, and insecurity. Jesus said the basic problem is in our hearts — and the reason is because we are alienated from our Creator.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear..." Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:1-2, NKJV).

(This column is based on the words and writings of the late Rev. Billy Graham.)

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Table with 12 columns (Time slots: 11/11, M, A, D1, D2, 5 PM, 5:30, 6 PM, 6:30, 7 PM, 7:30, 8 PM, 8:30, 9 PM, 9:30, 10 PM, 10:30, 11 PM, 11:30, 12 AM, 12:30) and multiple rows of program listings for various channels like WINM, CBS, Antenna, ABC, NBC, etc.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words, including 'Tax prep pro', 'London gallery', 'Actress West', 'Young fellow', etc.

Table with 11 columns and 51 rows representing a crossword puzzle grid. Some cells contain numbers, others are empty.

