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Community of love and recovery

Members of Hannah's House spend Christmas revisiting their healing journeys

By SYDNEY KENT

Michelle Chandler spent Christmas morning with the loving staff at Hannah's House, the first and only intensive recovery home for women in Wells County. It was a

stark contrast from the year before. "Where was I on Christmas last year?" Chandler hesitated for a moment before she answered, a quick glance to a set of eyes seemed to assure her. Andrea Dimond, director of Hannah's House, gently covered Chandler's hand with her own. "I was in Rockville prison," Chandler continued softly. "It was very sad and very lonely. I was thankful that I was alive. Honestly, I should have been dead."

Chandler grew up in Dayton, Tenn., where a shoulder injury began her addiction to pain pills over 26 years ago. She said the community offered little resources to address the issue at the time. Though she managed to find freedom from the constant craving for pills, she relapsed in her addiction two years ago after an injury to her spine left her in unbearable pain.

"I couldn't get off of the pills again," Chandler explained. "They tried to put me on suboxone (a medicine to treat dependence on opioids), (and) it made me really tired. I couldn't function. I turned to meth so I could work. I cried out to God one day to please help me, but please don't send me to jail — I went to jail two days

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Cheyenne Neuenschwander, at left, and Michelle Chandler sit on the couch together at Grace and Mercy. (Photo by Sydney Kent)



Residents and staff embrace each other as they sit together in the living room at Grace and Mercy. (Photo by Sydney Kent)

A Christmas season full of grace and mercy

Grace and Mercy director, clients discuss the trials and successes of the Christmas season

By SYDNEY KENT

The Christmas season at Grace and Mercy, the sister organization of Hannah's House, has a different tone due to the less-intensive nature of the program. Some women may be at the beginning of their journey in recovery, while other women are preparing to move into their own homes.

"This is certainly a time of reflection for women on where they were last year," Bethanie Burns, program director at Grace and Mercy, explained. "They weren't in a good place. They are in fear of showing up at their families house. Because residents here can go home for Christmas, they have apprehension about how they might respond, especially if they haven't seen their kids."

The staff and residents at both residential homes came together for a Christmas celebration, which Burns said was possible through the outpouring of love from the community.

"There were a lot of moms struggling this year. If they didn't have a job, how would they have a Christmas?" Burns smiled. "The community provided gifts and stockings. Some organizations took on a giving or angel tree, some businesses came together on their own just to give. Matt Yergler made it so the ladies had a nice meal for the Christmas dinner. One family even opened up their home to the ladies on Christmas Day."

For those new into recovery, Burns said that holidays are tough.

"It's hard. Reconciliation hasn't happened yet," Burns explained. "Just not being able to be with family yet because those bridges haven't been mended."

For many in recovery, they are forced to distance themselves from previous friends and family that continue to use drugs. This was the case for Cassandra Casto, a recent graduate from the program.

Casto was born and raised into addiction. By 17-years-old, she was a regular drug user. She earned her first drug possession charge three years after that. Pursuant to an

agreement Casto made with her probation, she was required to complete a recovery program.

"Sitting in jail, I received an acceptance letter to (a recovery house) in Huntington that I didn't even apply for. I did well until I got my phone back and started talking to all my old friends. After eight months, I moved programs. I told everyone that the program just didn't fit me. I had relapsed in my head already. In my second program — it started to show through my actions."

Casto said that within the same week she graduated from the second program, she also rented her own home, and was released from probation. She sunk back into addiction shortly after.

"I hadn't worked on anything about myself in either program," Casto said. "Last November, I was sitting in a hotel room talking to a friend of mine and it's like everything stopped. I realized how everything around me was falling apart and I needed to do something about it."

Casto attended a rehab facility over three hours away in order to distance herself from her addiction. It was at church one Sunday morning when her admission to God that she was slipping again led her to find a new home at Grace and Mercy.

"When I got to Grace and Mercy, I focused a lot on myself," Casto explained. "I was determined to make it this time. I began to be honest with myself and everybody around me. I let God do his work inside of me."

The verses Jeremiah 29:11-14 have impacted Casto during her recovery as they assure her that all will be restored.

"I found freedom from addiction and the lifestyle that I was living," Casto said. "December 17th (I had) 10 months sober. I have my own apartment, a great relationship with my boyfriend, and a place I can call home. I no longer let my past determine where I go."

"We'd love to have someone volunteer

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The secret life of gift cards: Here's what happens to the billions that go unspent

By DEE-ANN DURBIN
AP Business Writer

Gift cards make great stocking stuffers — just as long as you don't stuff them in a drawer and forget about them after the holidays.

Americans are expected to spend nearly \$30 billion on gift cards this holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation. Restaurant gift cards are the most popular, making up one-third of those sales.

Most of those gift cards will be redeemed. Paytronix, which tracks restaurant gift card sales, says around 70 percent of gift cards are used within six months.

But many cards — tens of billions of dollars' worth — wind up forgotten or otherwise unused. That's when the life of a gift card gets more complicated, with expiration dates or inactivity fees that can vary by state.

Here's what to know about the gift cards you're giving — or getting:

LOVED, BUT LOST

After clothing, gift cards will be the most popular present this holiday season. Nearly half of Americans plan to give them, according to the National Retail Federation.

But many will remain unspent. Gift cards get lost or forgotten, or recipients hang on to them for a special occasion. In a July survey, the consumer finance company Bankrate found that 47 percent of U.S. adults had at least one unspent gift card or voucher. The average value of unused gift cards is \$187 per person, a total of \$23 billion.

THE GIFT OF TIME

Under a federal law that went into effect in 2010, a gift card can't expire for five years from the time it was purchased or from the last time someone added money to it. Some state laws require an even longer period. In New York, for instance, any gift card purchased after Dec. 10, 2022, can't expire

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Conflicts rage abroad, a fractured Congress tries to rally support

By STEPHEN GROVES
and SEUNG MIN KIM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the Senate wrapped up its work for the year, Sen. Michael Bennet took to the floor of the nearly empty chamber and made a late-night plea for Congress to redouble support for Ukraine: "Understand the stakes at this moment."

It was the third time in recent months the Colorado Democrat has kept the Senate working late by holding up unrelated legislation in a bid to cajole lawmakers to approve tens of billions of dollars in weaponry and economic aid for Ukraine. During a nearly hour-long, emotional speech, he called on senators to see the nearly 2-year-old conflict as a defining

clash of authoritarianism against democracy and implored them to consider what it means for Ukrainians to fight "on that freezing front line and not know whether we're going to come through with the ammunition."

Yet Congress broke for the holidays and is not expected to return for two weeks while continued aid for Ukraine has nearly been

exhausted. The Biden administration is planning to send one more aid package before the new year, but says it will be the last unless Congress approves more money.

With support slipping in Congress even as conflicts and unrest rattle global security, the United States is once again struggling to assert its role in the world. Under the influence of Donald Trump,

the former president who is now the Republican Party front-runner, GOP lawmakers have increasingly taken a skeptical stance toward U.S. involvement abroad, particularly when it comes to Ukraine.


Leaders of traditional allies Britain and France have implored Western nations to continue their robust support, but Russia's

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Outside

Chance of showers today, cloudy and cool tonight

Today	Wed.	Thursday
High 55	High 45	High 41
Low 32	Low 31	Low 29

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Hannah's House

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later.”
A mother of seven and grandmother of eight children, Chandler tearfully spoke about how her addiction has impacted her relationships with the people she loves the most.

“I lost custody of my children when my oldest was seven years old. The shame that I —” Chandler paused as she cried into her hands. “It kept me away from them. My daughter became addicted too. We came here to get away from that. She’s in recovery and we have a good relationship now. I still have two (children) really struggling with addiction, and we’re praying for them a lot.”

“We sure are,” Dimond assured her. “I used again,” Chandler continued to cry. “When I got out of prison, I was supposed to come here and my out date was wrong. I went to my parole officer, Steve Cale, and told him what I did. I said that I need help and asked him to please, please, please help me. That I don’t want to live this life anymore. He put me in Wells County Jail and told me he would get me into the Hannah House and I am so thankful. I love them.”

“We love you,” Bethanie Burns, program director at Grace and Mercy, interjected.

“I told her I’m not going to let her go to Grace and Mercy,” Dimond joked as she pulled Chandler in for a hug.

“Bluffton is an uncommon community for recovery and love,” Chandler said.

Chandler looks forward to the future with excitement and reflection. She has goals to obtain her drivers license again, receive her GED and eventually pursue a career in peer recovery. She also hopes that her children trapped in addiction will follow in her footsteps.

“My relationship with Christ is first

and foremost,” Chandler smiled. “I know I cannot do this without Him. I want my kids to see that if I can do it, they can too.”

For Cheyenne Neuenschwander, another resident in recovery at Hannah’s House, addiction has just begun to infiltrate her life. A recent car accident that injured two minor passengers in her vehicle and led to charges for driving under the influence while causing endangerment led her to the nonprofit.

“I was born into a drug-addicted family,” she began. “My mom was a pill addict, and my dad used marijuana, though together they did meth and other drugs. By the age of 12, I was on probation. I went to the International School of Beaverton in Portland. I was there for quite a bit of time. When it was nearing the time I was supposed to leave, both of my parents were incarcerated. I told my probation officer I wanted to be placed into foster care. I spent about a year in foster care. The family that adopted me, as soon as I moved in, were ready to adopt me immediately. I always felt welcome. I was adopted on Feb. 12, 2020.”

Neuenschwander said she had been living on her own for about a year and working at a jail after she decided college wasn’t a fit for her. This is when she began smoking marijuana and misusing her prescription for Vyvanse.

“I eventually got so bad that I was in psychosis,” Neuenschwander continued. “It went on for a month. I pushed everyone away. I was paranoid. I called the Bluffton Police Department and was talking to them. I barely remember what happened — I just know that it was bad. Eventually, I got into a car accident with two other people.”

Following the accident, Neuenschwander was charged with an OWI

and spent approximately one month in the Wells County Jail before she arrived at Hannah’s House.

“This is really the first time I’ve ever openly admitted that I was an addict,” she said. “I’ve always admitted I have an addiction in my genes, but I’ve never sat and looked at myself and said ‘Yes, Cheyenne, you are being an addict.’ I’m hoping, like Michelle said, to improve my faith in God.”

Neuenschwander said she gave her life to Christ around June of 2019, but never attempted to have a relationship with God. Since arriving at Hannah’s House, she said she can pray and absorb the information. She is also reading the bible on her own for the first time.

During the first 30 days at Hannah’s House, women experience around-the-clock supervision and daily services to meet their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs during this critical time in early recovery from addiction. When appropriate, women then move on to a long-term transitional program at the nonprofit’s umbrella organization, Grace and Mercy.

Dimond said that the nonprofit would like to see more mentors that want to spend time with women in recovery, as well as people who would like to volunteer to teach a class for budgeting, cake decorating, devotional time, and more. Women are always in need of more personal hygiene and products like toilet paper, pads, tampons, and paper towels. Kroger gift cards are also appreciated. Anyone who would like to volunteer, donate, or learn more about Hannah’s House may visit the group’s Facebook page or contact Grace and Mercy at 260-353-1006.

sydney@news-banner.com

Weather

Tuesday, December 26, 2023

(24-hour observations at 10:13 p.m. Monday)
High: 58; Low: 42; Precipitation: 0.12 inches of rain
Wabash River Level (at the Main Street bridge): 1.39 feet at 9:45 p.m. Monday

Wells County forecast

Today: A 20 percent chance of showers before 1 p.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 55. Southwest wind 5 to 10 mph.

Tonight: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 32. West wind 5 to 10 mph.

Wednesday: Partly sunny, with a high near 45. Northeast wind 5 to 10 mph.

Wednesday Night: A 20 percent chance of showers. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 31. North wind around 10 mph.

Thursday: A chance of rain and snow showers before 1 p.m., then a chance of rain showers. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 41. Chance of precipitation is 40 percent.

Thursday Night: A 40 percent chance of showers, mainly before 1 a.m. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 29.

Friday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 40.

Friday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 26.

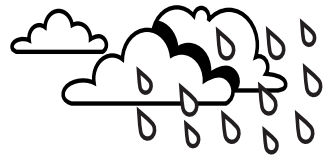
Saturday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 39.

Saturday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 27.

Sunday: Partly sunny, with a high near 39.

Sunday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 25.

New Year’s Day: Mostly sunny, with a high near 38.



Grace and Mercy

(Continued from Page 1)

to help take that burden off of the mothers,” Burns said. “Especially for the babies in Wells County, there’s not much. Women can’t pay rent and childcare. But it will change a generation — if

you can help a mom breathe and get to do what she needs to do so she can take care of her kids.”

Additional needs for the nonprofit include toiletry and paper product items, as well as grocery store and gas

gift cards. Burns said childcare is the biggest need.

Anyone with an interest in learning more about Grace and Mercy should contact Christine Walker at 260-353-1006.

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Secret life of gift cards

(Continued from Page 1)

for nine years.

Differing state laws are one reason many stores have stopped using expiration dates altogether, says Ted Rossman, a senior industry analyst at Bankrate.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

While it may take gift cards years to expire, experts say it’s still wise to spend them quickly. Some cards — especially generic cash cards from Visa or MasterCard — will start accruing inactivity fees if they’re not used for a year, which eats away at their value. Inflation also makes cards less valuable over time. And if a retail store closes or goes bankrupt, a gift card could be worthless.

Perhaps consider clearing out your stash on National Use Your Gift Card Day, a five-year-old holiday created by a public relations executive and now backed by multiple retailers. The next one is Jan. 20, 2024.

OR SELL IT

If you have a gift card you don’t want, one option is

to sell it on a site like Card-Cash or Raise. Rossman says resale sites won’t give you face value for your cards, but they will typically give 70 to 80 cents per dollar.

THE MONEY TRAIL

What happens to the money when a gift card goes unused? It depends on the state where the retailer is incorporated.

When you buy a gift card, a retailer can use that money right away. But it also becomes a liability; the retailer has to plan for the possibility that the gift card will be redeemed.

Every year, big companies calculate “breakage,” which is the amount of gift card liability they believe won’t be redeemed based on historical averages. For some companies, like Seattle-based Starbucks, breakage is a huge profit-driver. Starbucks reported \$212 million in revenue from breakage in 2022.

But in at least 19 states — including Delaware, where many big companies are incorporated — retailers must

work with state unclaimed property programs to return money from unspent gift cards to consumers. Money that isn’t recovered by individual consumers is spent on public service initiatives; in the states’ view, it shouldn’t go to companies because they haven’t provided a service to earn it.

CLAIM IT

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have unclaimed property programs. Combined, they return around \$3 billion to consumers annually, says Misha Werschkul, the executive director of the Washington State Budget and Policy Center.

Werschkul says it can be tricky to find the holders of unspent gift cards, but the growing number of digital cards that name the recipient helps. State unclaimed property offices jointly run the website MissingMoney.com, where consumers can search by name for any unclaimed property they’re owed, including cash from gift cards.

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OBITUARIES

Lorene Hoopingarner, 99

Lorene Hoopingarner, 99, of West Lafayette and formerly of Ossian, died Friday morning Dec. 22, 2023, at Cumberland Pointe Health Campus in West Lafayette, Ind. Lorene was born on March 14, 1924, in Steuben County, Ind., a daughter of the late Dale and Esther Butler.

She was united in marriage to John D. Hoopingarner on June 14, 1947, in Steuben County. He preceded her in death on September 16, 2014, after 67 years of marriage.

Survivors include her daughter, Gail (Burk) Thompson; son in law, Larry Combs; three grandsons; and three great-grandchildren.

She was preceded in death by her husband John; daughter, Kay Combs; a sister, Anna Rose; and a brother, Delmer Butler.

Private services will take place at a later date at The Tower Life Center in Zanesville.

Interment will take place in the Hoverstock Cemetery in Zanesville.

To sign Lorene's on-line guest book visit www.myers-funeralhomes.com.

Joy Cash, 63

Joy Cash, 63, of Bluffton, died Saturday evening, Dec. 23, 2023, at her residence.

Funeral arrangements are pending with Goodwin – Cale & Harnish Memorial Chapel in Bluffton.

Oscar L. Heyne, 90

Oscar L. Heyne, 90, of Bluffton, died Sunday afternoon, Dec. 24, 2023, at Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne.

Funeral arrangements are pending with Goodwin – Cale & Harnish Memorial Chapel in Bluffton.

Donald Eugene Owens, 74

Donald Eugene Owens, 74, of rural Keystone, died Saturday morning, Dec. 23, 2023, at his residence.

Funeral arrangements are pending with Goodwin – Cale & Harnish Memorial Chapel in Bluffton.



Pictured in the photo is Lane Sander with Renovate Counseling Services cutting the ribbon. (Photo submitted)

Renovate Counseling Services celebrates expansion

Renovate Counseling Services hosted a Business During Hours and Ribbon Cutting Celebration for the unveiling of their newly expanded facility. Renovate Counseling Services, founded by Lane Sander in 2016, has experienced remarkable growth over the past seven years and is marking this milestone with a significant expansion.

The groundbreaking for the expansion project, which added an impressive 1200 sq. ft. to their facility, took place in May of 2023. Renovate Counseling Services, known for its commitment to providing high-quality mental health counseling services, is situated at 105 West Cherry St. in Bluffton.

Lane Sander, the owner of Renovate Counseling

Services, shared the journey of the organization, stating, "I had a dream of opening a facility someday. As I was working at the church, I figured I would see a few people on Friday's and help some folks here in our community and see where it would go. Seven years ago, we opened our doors." The growth has been phenomenal, leading to the need for additional space and resources.

The newly expanded facility in Bluffton now spans 3700 sq. ft., boasting 17 offices to accommodate the increased demand for counseling services. Currently, Renovate Counseling Services employs 20 therapists across their Bluffton and Huntington

locations, with plans for further expansion to Decatur by April 2024. The organization is dedicated to addressing a wide range of mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, and providing support for couples, families, and children, and more.

As Sander notes, "As stigma continues to be removed from the mental health side of things, people are willing to ask for help and take the steps forward seeking guidance." Renovate Counseling Services takes pride in offering an unbiased approach to helping individuals navigate life's challenges.

The organization is actively hiring to meet

the growing demand for its services, with plans to add at least five to ten therapists and additional office staff in the coming year. Sander attributes the success and growth of Renovate Counseling Services to its dedicated team of therapists and talented office staff.

For more information about Renovate Counseling Services and their expanding services, please visit their website at www.renovatecounseling.org.

Financial Focus

A key element of investing

We've reached the end of another year — so it's appropriate to reflect on the nature of time and how it affects us. And time certainly is a key element in the pursuit of your financial goals.

As an investor, time can be your greatest ally — when you invest for the long term, you could achieve an impressive cumulative growth in value, though there are no guarantees. But you also need to consider time in other ways. For example, each year, you should check your progress toward various financial goals. If you're falling behind, you may need to adjust your investment mix — or the goals themselves.

You also need to consider time in choosing your investment strategies. For longer-term goals, such as retirement, you'll need to consider owning a reasonable number of growth-oriented investments. But for shorter-term goals, such as a wedding or vacation, you may want to look at investments with fewer fluctuations in value.

Here's one more point to keep in mind: Over time, your risk tolerance may change, so you may need to adjust your investment approach and expectations.

When you invest, your biggest consideration may be time — so use it wisely.

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MAKING SENSE OF INVESTING

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Congress tries to rally support

(Continued from Page 1)

President Vladimir Putin is emboldened and building up resources for a fresh effort as the war heads towards its third year.

Bolstering Ukraine's defense used to be celebrated in the Capitol as one of a few remaining bipartisan causes. But now the fate of roughly \$61 billion in funding is tied to delicate policy negotiations on Capitol Hill over border and immigration changes. And in the last year, lawmakers have had to mount painstaking, round-the-clock efforts to pass even legislation that maintains basic functions of the U.S. government.

Still, congressional leaders are trying to rally members to address global challenges they say are among the most difficult in decades: the largest land invasion of a European nation since World War II, a war between Israel and Hamas, unrest and economic calamity driving historic levels of migration and China asserting itself as a superpower.

In the Senate, both Demo-

cratic and Republican leaders have cast the \$110 billion aid package, which is attempting to address all those issues, as a potential turning point for democracy around the world. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters last week that "history will look back if we don't support our ally in Ukraine."

In a year-end speech, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said: "From South Texas to Southeast Asia and from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, it is an historically challenging and consequential time to protect America's interests, our allies and our own people."

The Republican leader, a key supporter of Ukraine aid, has tried for months to build support in his party for Ukraine. But after a \$6 billion military and civilian aid package for Ukraine collapsed in October, McConnell began telling top White House officials that any funding would need to be paired with border policy changes.

The White House deliberately stayed out of the negotiations until senior

officials felt the time was right to do so. But senior Republicans involved in the border talks believe the administration stepped in too late, ultimately delaying the prospects of additional Ukraine aid getting approved until the new year.

Senate negotiators have had to navigate both the explosive politics of border policy as well as one of the most complex areas of American law.

"This is a tightrope, but we are still on it," said Sen. Chris Murphy, the lead Democratic negotiator.

The White House's strategy of including Republican priorities such as Israel aid and border security in the package has also raised several thorny issues for Democrats.

Progressive lawmakers, critical of Israel's campaign into Gaza that has killed thousands of civilians, have called for humanitarian conditions to be placed on the money for Israel. And Latino Democrats in both the Senate and House have also been critical of restrictions

on asylum claims.

Any package also faces deep uncertainty in the House, where Republican Speaker Mike Johnson holds tenuous control of the closely divided chamber. Before becoming speaker in October, Johnson had repeatedly voted against aid for Ukraine, but he has surprised many by offering support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and saying he wants to find a way to approve the aid.

But Trump's allies in the House have repeatedly tried to stop the U.S. from sending more aid to Ukraine.

As the border and immigration talks drag forward in the Senate, Johnson has pushed for sweeping measures. On social media, he has called for "transformational change to secure the border," and pointed to a hardline bill that passed the House on a party-line vote.

As senators left Washington, they still sought to assure Ukrainians that American help was on its way. White House staff and Senate negotiations planned

to work on drafting border legislation for the next two weeks in hopes that it would be ready for action when Congress returns.

Schumer told The Associated Press he was "hopeful," but "I wouldn't go so far as to say confident yet." He sought to put the pressure on Republicans, saying they needed to be ready to compromise.

Yet Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican who is a Ukraine supporter, expressed confidence that Congress would act. He alluded to the words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, another European leader who eventually elicited robust support from the U.S. to repel an invasion.

"Americans will always do the right thing," Wicker said. "After they've exhausted every other alternative."

Democrats critical of cryptic IEDC spending requests

By **WHITNEY DOWNARD**
Indiana Capital Chronicle

The Indiana Economic Development Corporation, a quasi-public state agency tasked with recruiting companies and bolstering the state's economic growth, outlined nearly \$300 million in spending requests before the State Budget Committee Tuesday but continued to hedge when asked directly about state dollars spent on often secretive deals.

The \$294 million total ask covers six separate projects with scarce details. The IEDC cannot sign contracts with incoming entities until receiving approval from the committee — individual Republican members

have indicated they signed non-disclosure agreements to learn more about the deals but Democrats in the super-minority have frequently bemoaned their exclusion.

"... I did lose trust in the agency because that is the same exact statement we always hear: 'We will follow up back with you.' 'We will let you know,'" said Sen. Fady Qaddoura, of Indianapolis. "We are not legislative partners because we did not deserve the respect to be reached out to (and) to be given that information."

Brock Herr, the IEDC's senior vice president of business development, described the IEDC's process for calculating incentives, including cost-

benefit analyses, job commitments and investment returns.

"We do have an internal target that — I would say, competitive reasons — we don't disclose publicly," Herr said. "We look to have a blended target of all projects that reach that, which gives us the ability to have some discretion to be a little bit more aggressive on some of those more competitive projects that may warrant a slightly more aggressive deal."

The budget committee approved the requests Tuesday by voice vote, in one lump adoption of an amended agenda. There were no votes against, despite Democrat objections to the IEDC's approach.

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Year-end economic news bringing holiday cheer

The end-of-year data is giving economy watchers plenty cause for holiday cheer.

Consumer spending remains robust, and the early holiday sales suggests a record year, even after controlling for inflation. That seems reasonable given that household wealth is at a record level and unemployment is lower than it has been since the Nixon administration. Mid-December job reports showed record employment as part of three years of sustained employment gains.

Inflation-adjusted wages have been growing for several months now with the biggest gains accruing the lowest-paid 80 percent of workers.

Credit card debt is back down to 2019 levels, and there is nothing apparent on the consumption side that would risk derailing this period of growth.

Strong demand for goods and services means strong corporate profits, which has resulted in record-high stock market indices. The stock market is a poor predictor of future economic performance, but better returns further boost consumer spending, particularly among retirees.

Business capital investment is strong but not spectacular, suggesting less volatile expectations by firms. Business expansion is broad and sustained since late 2020, but it is not at a feverish level. New business formation has been proceeding at record levels for close to three years now. Here in Indiana, applications for new businesses are up 84 percent since COVID, with the most recent quarter near the all-time record.

Fueling much of this optimistic behavior is the steadily retreating inflation. We are now 18 months past peak inflation, and the broadest measures of price change have dropped 16 out of the last 18 months. The measure of personal consumption inflation growth is actually negative over the past two quarters. This is caused by the Federal Reserve reducing the money supply, most visibly through increases to their policy interest rates.

We have now been through seven months without a rate increase, and the Fed again held rates steady this week. It now seems almost certain the Fed will begin easing rates within two quarters, and they have indicated that we should expect at least three cuts in 2024. Financial markets are anticipating this, so mortgage interest rates have declined for seven straight weeks. This will improve the home buying season this spring.

All of this is good news, but I am looking more closely at labor productivity. Typically, as labor markets tighten, productivity growth slows, or even declines. The reason for this is fairly self-evident. When unemployment rates are high, it is the least productive firms that make cuts. This boosts production per worker, since only the strong businesses survive. When unemployment rates are very low, it because of strong demand. This strong demand for goods and services means a number of less productive firms can still hang on. This slows productivity growth.

For the first 18 months after COVID, this pattern almost perfectly repeated itself. Big job losses meant that only the best firms survived, so productivity growth soared. As we got back to normal, we saw productivity growth dip into negative territory as expected. But, for close to two years productivity growth has slowly improved. Last quarter it stood at 2.4 percent annualized rate. This is good at any time, but when it happens when the unemployment rate is near a 50-year low, it signals something else is happening.

No one is sure about what might be happening to boost worker productivity, but there are several possibilities. First, is the cyclical nature of technology. We can go through long periods of buying and installing new technology without much effect on the productivity data. It took desktop computers almost two decades to really affect overall efficiency. We might just be in a cycle where investments in digital technology for the last decade is boosting our efficiency at making goods and delivering services.

A second feature might be the expansion of remote work. For many occupations, the ability to work from home offers substantial productivity improvements. Randomized control trials from before COVID identified substantially more efficient workplaces when workers could voluntarily remain at home. There is significant evidence that businesses and workers are working out the kinks in technology and processes to make themselves more efficient.

A third aspect of the economy is simple demographic change. Millennials are now the largest generation at work in the economy. These workers are entering the most productive years of their work lives, giving the U.S. a large bump in average worker productivity. This alone is large enough to boost overall economic performance.

Most likely, all of these factors are working to make the current economy grow faster than we've seen so far in the 21st century. The blistering pace of GDP growth last quarter, topping 5.2 percent, suggests this is not a transient effect. Given a smooth patch of economic fundamentals, the U.S. might be heading for a period more reminiscent of the late 1990s than anything we've seen since. That would be most welcoming, but there are things that could derail a period of peaceful prosperity.

The U.S. has a high debt, and though it has receded in recent quarters, remains uncomfortably high. The U.S. has weathered high debt for a lot longer than most economists thought possible a generation ago. However, higher borrowing costs threaten our ability to spend money where it is needed, and forces difficult spending and tax choices. A remedy to our deficit problem will require substantial political compromise on both spending and taxes. With the incentive structure in Congress fully condemning compromise, we should not expect action anytime soon.

This climate of opposition comes at the behest of voters. We elected these folks; they reflect our values or lack thereof. We will pay for their folly, but don't blame them. We are at fault for electing people to "fight" for us rather than "compromise" for us. Smart, principled compromise is what we need to sustain our growing economy.

Michael Hicks is the George and Frances Center Distinguished Professor of Economics and the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State University.



Michael Hicks

Hoosier Opinions



Donald Trump and the insurrection fallout

INDIANAPOLIS — In 1868, three years after the Civil War ended, the 14th Amendment was enshrined in the United States Constitution. It was aimed at hundreds of thousands of officials of the Confederate states, who took up arms or publicly supported the rebellion.

Section 3 of this amendment reads: "No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability."

After state high courts rejected 14th Amendment arguments in Michigan and Minnesota, the Colorado Supreme Court issued a thunderclap on Tuesday, ruling that Republican presidential frontrunner Donald J. Trump cannot appear on that state's presidential primary ballot. It will likely be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Said the majority in the 4-3 ruling, "President Trump did not merely incite the insurrection. Even when the siege on the Capitol was fully underway, he continued to support it. These actions constituted overt, voluntary, and direct participation in the insurrection. We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach."

Conservative commentator Jonathan V. Last writing for The Bulwark, put why this decision was made in these succinct terms: "Donald Trump falsely proclaimed that the presidential election was illegitimate. He attempted, through both legal and extra-legal means, to overturn the result of the election. Trump's maneuverings in both the Department of Justice and the Department of Defense were so dangerous that 10 former secretaries of Defense penned an op-ed warning that it was not lawful to use the military in an election dispute. Trump then called thousands of people to Washington, assembled them into a crowd which he knew was armed, and personally directed them to march to the Capitol and 'take back' the country 'with strength.'"

Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said after Trump was acquitted in his second impeachment trial. "There's no question — none — that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day. No question about it. We all were here. We saw what hap-

pened. It was a violent insurrection for the purpose of trying to prevent the peaceful transfer of power after a legitimately certified election, from one administration to the next."

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy said President Trump's conduct on Jan. 6 had been "atrocious and totally wrong," saying he had "incited people" to attack the U.S. Capitol.

But in their followup actions and words, McConnell said he would "absolutely" vote for Trump in 2024 if he wins the GOP nomination. McCarthy ended up in Mar-a-Lago two weeks after the insurrection, throwing him a political lifeline that has resulted in Trump's overwhelming frontrunner status for the nomination despite facing 91 criminal charges.

The Colorado ruling brought a stern response from U.S. Sen. Mike Braun, whose Indiana gubernatorial campaign was endorsed by the former president. "With the Colorado Supreme Court's decision, the self-anointed 'defenders of democracy' have removed their political enemy from the ballot, stripping Colorado voters of their right to vote for the candidate of their choice and joining radical AGs and Biden DOJ in interfering in the 2024 election," Braun said in a statement.

American and Indiana courts routinely rule on the validity of candidacies and whether people can remain on the ballot for a variety of reasons. For instance, a Marion County judge ruled earlier this month that an Indiana law keeping Republican Senate candidate John Rust off the primary ballot was invalid. That case will be decided by the Indiana Supreme Court in 2024.

Adam Serwer, writing in The Atlantic, observed, "There are a lot of practical reasons for opposing Trump's disqualification. One is that it removes the choice of rejecting Trump from the electorate, which might seem undemocratic, even if it's done with constitutional provisions adopted by the people's chosen representatives. Another is that it could damage the legitimacy of democracy itself, by appearing to confirm Trump's allegations that the political system is 'rigged' against him. Still another is that it could lead to unrest or political violence."

In his 1796 farewell address, President George Washington warned of "cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men (who) will be enabled to subvert the power of the people, and to usurp for themselves the reins of government; destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion."

We have never witnessed or experienced the stress tests now facing our democracy. Americans are in for a volatile 11 months heading into the November 2024 election.

The columnist is publisher of *Howey Politics Indiana* at www.howeypolitics.com. Find him on Facebook and Twitter @hwypol.



Brian Howey

Politicking

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Ignorance and apathy

The joke is told about a poll taker who asks about ignorance and apathy in the country. "I don't know, and I don't care," says the respondent.

The consequences of that attitude are playing out across America.

There are two questions most reporters never seem to ask when it comes to mass demonstrations like the recent ones over the Israeli-Hamas War. One is whether they are spontaneous, or are they organized and subsidized by outside entities? Second, have large financial gifts from foreign entities and left-wing organizations compromised some universities that fear losing money should they speak up in ways that might offend the donors? Failure to ask these questions contributes to public (and student) ignorance and apathy.

Valerie Richardson of The Washington Times is an exception among journalists. She writes: "The same U.S. universities that increasingly are seen as breeding grounds for antisemitism have taken billions of dollars in previously undisclosed donations from the Middle East."

This connection between donations and influence is claimed in a lawsuit by the Lawfare Project on behalf of Carnegie Mellon University student Yael Cnaan. She says she has been the target of "pervasive anti-Jewish discrimination." Cnaan linked her allegations to the half-bil-



Cal Thomas

lion dollars donated to the university by Qatar since 2021.

Richardson writes about a report by the Network Contagion Research Institute which showed that "universities reported more than \$13 billion ... in gifts ... from foreign sources" between 2014 and 2019. Kenneth Marcus, president of the Brandeis Center, told the newspaper, "What they want is influence."

Shouldn't that be obvious?

During her recent controversial testimony before a congressional committee, Harvard President Claudine Gay claimed the school has "strict policies" on which gifts and contracts it accepts and that donors do not influence its policies. Is she saying that antisemitism is home grown? If so, what does that say about the biases of the professors who are transmitting ignorance and what some might consider propaganda to their students?

China has infiltrated American universities by making large donations that support "Confucius Institutes" which promote Chinese language and cultural programs. In 2019, there were a hundred such institutes. Today, there are reportedly fewer than five. Schools commonly "cited the potential loss of federal funding and external pressures as contributing to their decision to close" their institutes.

However, some critics say the

institutes that remain are being used as part of a larger effort to advance the interests of the Chinese Communist Party, which include spying and the theft of intellectual property, stealing U.S. military secrets and harassment of Chinese students and others who are critical of the Beijing regime.

Three years ago, a Jewish organization conducted a first-ever survey in all 50 states to discover what adults under 40 know about the Holocaust. The survey, conducted by the Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, found "sixty-three percent did not know that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and over half of those thought the death toll was fewer than 2 million." While more than 40,000 death camps and ghettos were established during World War II, "nearly half of U.S. respondents could not name a single one." One in 10 respondents did not recall ever having heard the word "Holocaust" before.

Deliberate ignorance and false teaching about events here and in the Middle East and China, along with the refusal of American media to pay serious attention to the connection between foreign donations and university policies and teaching, plays into the hands of those who do not wish America well.

Clearly the history departments at many schools need a serious upgrade and a lot of reporters could use a crash course in history at a university that refuses donations from foreign entities that have agendas.

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Parks Department announces Gingerbread contest winners

By **BARBARA BARBIERI**

This year the Bluffton Park Department's Gingerbread Contest attracted five entries and were on display in the lobby of the city building.

Declared winners were:
9 & under category: Tucker King's log cabin (#2)

10-15 age category: Lane McClure (#3), featuring the three little pigs
Adult 16+: Deena McClure (#4), featuring a snowman by a cabin

Other participants were Flora Paxson (#2) with Christmas Cottage and Ben Lawlor (#5) with Maddy's Wood Shop.

Due to lack of participation the event may not

be sponsored next year, the park department has explained.



1 Christmas Cottage by Flora Paxson



2 Snowy Cabin by Tucker King



3 The 3 Little Pigs by Lane McClure



4 Christmas in the Cabin by Deena McClure



5 Maddy's Wood Shop by Ben Lawlor

Zanesville News

by Melba Edwards

Someone made a mistake when they placed Halloween and Thanksgiving dates so close to Christmas! There is just too much going on to keep up with the work these holidays bring. I have only a few things to remember dates of for the rest of the year.

The Coffee Cafe is still open weekdays but closed holidays and weekends at the Zanesville Community Church of God.

Our Edwards Family Christmas is over. We were lucky to be able to rent the United Methodist fellowship/gym in Ossian and we thank them for that pleasure. The younger ones were glad to play a lot of basketball and no one got hurt. Counting our kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, all the spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends we had a total of just under 70. My niece Rita Botts Zeddis and her spouse Linn came to the celebration as they were sick and missed Thanksgiving.

This year, 2023, we had two weddings, a new grandson and two new great-grandbabies. Fifteen years ago we added six new babies!

The Zanesville Lions Community Party went well even though it was a terrible night with very high winds. All the decorations on the

fence were blown down and will have to be put up again. I am wondering if our scene at Ouabache State Park suffered damage and I will call about that.

There were about 50 present for the evening to have chili and hot dogs and to play free bingo and get a free picture with Santa. The Santa we usually have could not come as he had a tooth pulled so luckily my great-grandson filled in and did a good job.

Dale Best took the pictures using his mother Annette's fabulous camera and printer that hands you a great picture in a short time. Annette, his mother, was present also to help out. She is 95 years young and likes to help the Lions Club when she can.

There were lots of bingo prizes and those present had a great time playing. Lions members provided the prizes, Santa's treats, and the free pictures. Thanks to you who bought some apple dumplings and provided donations. We still have apple dumplings if you need some for \$3 each. They are frozen but fully cooked and come with caramel syrup on the side.

Our wreaths on wooden crosses are still available and are \$5 each.

Lions members present were Herman and Ann Hans, Melanie Martin, Larry Herron, Melba Edwards, Steve Keesler, Cheri Steed, Tom and Cheryl Tracey, and Robin Phillips. John Schumacher and his wife Eileen were present also to help out. Thanks to John who helped out Larry Herron to get the pavilion and other things winterized.

I told you the wind was terrible and when I went home about 9:30 I discovered I didn't have a dial tone on my home phone. I called the next morning to report that to the company and after answering many questions I was to have an appointed time for them to check the outage out. About 15 minutes later I got a text message on my cellphone to disregard the appointment as others are also out in the area.

As the new year approaches we at the Lions Club will be looking at some fundraisers. If you are interested in collectible war and war heroes books we may have a sale soon. Give me a call on my home phone and leave a message. I also have donated several framed pictures to the Lions and am willing to show them to you on a warmer day if you are looking to buy some.

Events at the Creative Arts Council of Wells County

428 S. Oak St. in Bluffton
260-824-5222

www.wellscreativearts.com
creativeartscouncil@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/wellscreativearts

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Creative Arts office hours — Monday through Thursday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Friday (by appointment only).

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Children's Choir Winter Camp

Creative Arts is excited to introduce our Children's Choir Winter Camp, where kids can explore their love for music and singing in a joyful and supportive environment. Our Children's Choir Winter Camp is a two-week program designed for 3-8 grade students passionate about singing. Led by experienced and enthusiastic director Alyssa Plisco, this camp aims to foster a love of music, develop vocal skills, and build confidence in young singers.

Our Children's Choir Winter Camp will occur from Monday, Jan. 8, 2024 through Saturday, Jan. 20, 2024 at Creative Arts, 428 S. Oak St., Bluffton. Registration ends Jan. 3.

To register or for more information, please visit our website <https://www.wellscreativearts.com/childrens-choir> or call 260-824-5222. Tuition: \$85 Give your child a memorable and enriching winter experience by joining our Children's Choir Winter Camp. We look forward to welcoming them into our musical community and fostering their love for singing!

Noir Suspicions

Friday, Feb. 16 at 7 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 17 at 3 p.m.

Attention all mystery enthusiasts! We cordially invite you to join us for an evening of intrigue and suspense with Creative Arts Theater newest production: Noir Suspicions! Get ready to put on your detective

Ouabache State Park Wonderland of Lights

Ouabache State Park's Wonderland of Lights continues daily through Sunday, Dec. 31.

Admission is \$5 per car.

There are three different light shows

at the fire tower to be synchronized to music. One selection will run Monday through Thursday, a different selection on Friday and Saturday and another on Sundays.

Fort Wayne Children's Zoo presents "Zoo Wonderland"

The Fort Wayne Children's Zoo will be open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. today through Sat. Dec. 30. Admission is \$12 for adults, \$10 for children and free to those 2 and under.

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Bluffton, Indiana

Knights, Wildcats fight to the finish

Lawrence North hoop with 0.00.4 left gets a two-point victory over Norwell

By RICK SPRUNGER

Norwell's girls' basketball team lost a tough one Saturday afternoon as the Knights dropped their cross-class intersectional headliner to Class 4A No. 10 Lawrence North, 57-55.

Jamaya Thomas of Lawrence North took a sharp feed under the basket from Kama-ra Mills on the left baseline and scored the game-winner with 0:00.4 left.

Makenzie Fuess had tied the game for Norwell with a drive through the lane with 0:09 remaining prior to Lawrence North's winning play.

Norwell coach Eric Thornton didn't mince words in defeat.

"Our girls really gave us a gutsy effort," said Thornton, "but we feel like it's a game we should have won. We gave up some weakside rebounds, and we didn't take care of the ball."

The Knights were outrebounded 34-21 by Lawrence North and committed 24 turnovers. "And we were 9-for-18 from the free throw line," Thornton added.

"We were 9-for-18 tonight and lost by two," he reiterated, underscoring the stat. "That tells you how important free throws are."

All of that said, however, Norwell stood in tough against one of Indiana's elite programs in an ambitious bit of scheduling that few other schools in this area would have dared to attempt.

"Noblesville had invited us down to their tournament, and we would have had almost

two full weeks off prior to it," explained Thornton of the unusual opportunity. "We had an opening, and we wanted to schedule a game in there to prepare for that. But we didn't want to schedule someone that we knew we were going to beat."

"I don't like to lose, but playing that kind of game wasn't going to prepare us for anything," he said. "As it turned out, Lawrence North also had an opening, and so we reached out to them."

His team proved decisively that they were up to that kind of challenge.

The Knights ran out to an early 9-0 lead courtesy of three Norwell three-pointers, two of them by Kennedy Fuelling and one by Vanessa Rosswurm.

They built that margin to 33-20 on back-to-back threes by Fuess late in the second quarter.

And they still held a 35-22 edge on a bucket by Rosswurm 40 seconds into the second half.

But if it was Thomas that scored the winning points for Lawrence North, it was a furious and deadly full-court press employed by the Wildcats that made the winning basket possible.

"It's kind of a combination of things," second-year Lawrence North coach Stephen Thomas said about his team's defense. "It's basically a man-to-man with some built-in opportunities for some traps."

That press completely turned the game around in the third quarter and fueled a 20-2 Lawrence North spurt that took the Wildcats



Norwell sophomore Vanessa Rosswurm, bottom, works to secure the ball as she is surrounded by Lawrence North defenders in the first half of Saturday's game at Norwell. The Lady Knights struggled in the second half, giving up a 57-55 loss to the Lady Wildcats in the non-conference game. (Photos by Chad Kline)

from that 35-22 deficit to a 42-37 lead with 47 seconds left in the period.

During that span, Norwell missed nine straight field goal attempts and two free throws while committing seven turnovers.

Meanwhile, Lawrence North went to work. While the Wildcats committed seven turnovers themselves in the quarter, they also hit nine of 15 field goal attempts and battered the Knights 12-6 on the boards.

A three-pointer by Victoria Guyse tied the game at 35-35, and she followed a Norwell turnover with a drive down the lane to give the Wildcats their first lead of the game at 37-35 with 2:41 left in the period.

Fuess canned two free throws to retie the game. Then Naja Winston, a 5-10 sophomore who scored 19 points for Lawrence North, got a rebound basket, then a steal, layup, and three-point play to put the Wildcats in charge at 42-37.

"They are strong and athletic and aggressive, and that kind of pressure can just wear you down," said Thornton. "It's tough to get it back, but we were able to."

Annabelle Johnson broke Norwell's drought from the field with a five-footer in the lane that cut the gap to 42-39 at the break, and a 7-2 surge to start the fourth quarter regained the lead for the Knights at 46-44 on two Fuess free throws with 5:18 remaining.

Lawrence North immediately tied it, but Lilly Norris stepped up with a three-pointer from the right corner and a 49-46 Norwell advantage.

With the score 51-48, lightning struck from an unexpected source for Lawrence North. Emami Washington, the last player off the Wildcat bench, hit her only shot of the game, a three-pointer from the right corner that tied the score with 2:10 left.

Fuelling drove the lane to put Norwell back up 53-51, but back-to-back buckets by Kya Hurt flipped the scoreboard to a 55-53 Lawrence North lead at 0:34.

Fuess then tied the game to set up Thomas's game-winner.

If Lawrence North's press was bothersome for Norwell, Norwell's defense was

equally troublesome for the visitors.

"That 1-3-1 gave us trouble all day," said Thomas of a defense that caused a whopping 29 Lawrence North turnovers. "They are lengthy and long, and their guards are deceptively quick at getting into the passing lanes. It was causing us to be careless about leaving our feet and making bad passes."

The Lawrence North mentor added a prediction as he praised the Knights.

"That is a really, really, really good team over there," said Thomas, gesturing toward the Norwell locker room. "I fully expect them to win their state championship."

Fuess led all scorers with 20 points for Norwell, and Fuelling chipped in with 13.

The Knights were 20-for-44 from the field for a .455 shooting percentage.

Hurt joined Winston in double figures with 14 points for Lawrence North, which was 26-for-51 for .510 while only shooting two free throws all day.

"It's disappointing," said Thornton, "but I told our girls the same thing I told them after the Columbia City game: 'Don't hang on to this; but don't forget it, either. We need to learn from it.'"

Norwell won the junior varsity contest, 55-42.

Macie Saalfrank scored 18 points, Jada Dale 14, and Ashley Waldman 12 for Norwell. Larkin Smith added five points, Haley Williamson four, and Savanna Simerman two.

sports@news-banner.com

LAWRENCE NORTH 57, NORWELL 55

LAWRENCE NORTH (11-3): Kya Hurt 7-14 0-0 14, Kama-ra Mills 0-5 0-0 0, Naja Winston 8-11 2-2 19, Keke Butler 2-6 0-0 4, Jamaya Thomas 3-3 0-0 6, Elyssa Morris 0-0 0-0 0, Victoria Guyse 3-6 0-0 7, Ka'Nyriah Ridley 0-2 0-0 0, Natalia Franklin 2-3 0-0 4, Ashiyah Teague 0-0 0-0 0, Emami Washington 1-1 0-0 3. TOTAL: 26-51 2-2 57.

NORWELL (11-3): Annabelle Johnson 1-2 0-2 2, Kennedy Fuelling 4-13 3-8 13, Makenzie Fuess 6-11 6-6 20, Vanessa Rosswurm 4-10 0-0 9, Dekota Hubble 3-5 0-0 6, Haley Green 0-0 0-0 0, Lillian Norris 2-3 0-0 5, Addison Norris 0-0 0-0 0. TOTAL: 20-44 9-18 55.

Lawrence North 14 8 20 15 — 57
Norwell 17 16 6 16 — 55

Three-point shooting: Lawrence North 3-14 (Hurt 0-2, Mills 0-2, Winston 1-1, Butler 0-4, Fuess 1-2, Ridley 0-2, Washington 1-1), Norwell 6-10 (Fuelling 2-2, Fuess 2-3, Rosswurm 1-4, L. Norris 1-1). Rebounds: Lawrence North 34 (Winston 8, Hurt 7), Norwell 21. Turnovers: Lawrence North 29, Norwell 24. Personal fouls: Lawrence North 17, Norwell 8. Fouled out: Butler. Technical fouls: None. Junior Varsity: Norwell 55, Lawrence North 42.



Norwell senior Makenzie Fuess, right, looks to get rid of the basketball under the basket while being surrounded by Lawrence North defenders in the first half of Saturday's game at Norwell.

Colts stumble at Atlanta as their playoff hopes take a hit

By BILL TROCCHI
Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — After blowing out the Pittsburgh Steelers last week to move into a tie for first place in the AFC South, the Indianapolis Colts were feeling good about themselves as they tried to chase down a playoff spot in AFC.

One week later, the Colts seemed at a loss for answers after a dispiriting 29-10 loss to the Atlanta Falcons.

"It is a week-to-week league. The wins don't carry over and neither do the losses," said Colts quarterback Gardner Minshew.

The Colts had won four in a row before a 20-point loss to the Bengals on Dec. 10 halted momentum. But the Colts

bounced back with a 30-13 rout of the Steelers, giving themselves optimism they would return to the playoffs for the first time since 2020.

The solid play from the Steelers win carried over into the first possession of the game against the Falcons.

The Colts went 75 yards in 13 plays, capping the drive with a 1-yard run from Jonathan Taylor. The Colts' No. 1 back had missed three games with a thumb injury and appeared poised to lead the Indianapolis offense to a big day against the Falcons. It was the first touchdown allowed by the Falcons on the opening drive all season and the first rushing touchdown allowed from a running back for Atlanta.

The momentum, however, proved to be short-lived, as the Colts punted on their final four possessions of the first half and never again found the end zone.

What happened after the opening possession?

"Great question. If I had the answer, I'd give the perfect answer," said Colts coach Shane Steichen. "Credit to the Falcons. They did a good job up front with some things they were doing."

The Falcons managed to pressure Minshew into six sacks, including one on the opening possession of the third quarter that halted a productive Colts drive.

"I took a sack in the red zone that was 10 yards back and then you are looking at instead of a chance to go for seven, you are

looking at three," Minshew said. "It is plays like that that really hurt you."

Defensively, the Colts gave up four consecutive scoring drives starting in the second quarter, did not force a turnover and were never able to help out an offense that was out of sync with leading receiver Michael Pittman Jr. sidelined because of concussion symptoms.

"The Colts started all 10 of their offensive possessions either at or inside their 25-yard-line."

Minshew completed 20 of 37 passes for 201 yards and one interception.

Taylor finished with just 43 yards on 18 carries, and Colts running backs averaged 2.9 yards per carry. That led to several passing

situations for the Colts, and Minshew was under constant pressure.

"It starts when you can't run the ball," Minshew said. "Those guys can pin their ears back. We put ourselves in a lot of tough situations."

The Colts (8-7) know they are still firmly in position to make the playoffs with two regular-season games remaining. Next week, they host the Raiders before ending the regular season at home against the Texans.

"We play Sunday to Sunday," linebacker E.J. Speed said. "Different game plans and different situations we are put in, we just need to execute. Today, we did not execute to our standard. Luckily, we get next week to prove ourselves again."

Purdue retains No. 1 ranking while FAU rockets up to No. 7 in poll

Florida Atlantic's run to the Final Four last season was viewed as a nice story, a small program making a surprise run before sliding back into anonymity.

The Owls are showing this season that that was no fluke.

Coming off a double-overtime win over No. 4 Arizona, FAU moved up seven places to No. 7 in The Associated Press men's college

basketball poll released Monday. It's the Owls' highest ranking as a program after being No. 10 in the preseason poll.

"We wanted to play it in the worst way for a lot of reasons," FAU coach Dusty May said before the 96-95 win over Arizona on Saturday. "National television. Our guys wanted to be challenged. They love the challenge."

Purdue maintained its top ranking for the second straight week, receiving 46 first-place votes from a 60-person media panel after blowing out Jacksonville. No. 2 Kansas had five first-

place votes and No. 3 Houston received nine. Arizona and UConn rounded out the top five.

The Big 12 again had the most ranked teams with six and the Big East had four.

The ACC, Big Ten and SEC each had three.

The American Athletic Conference had two ranked

teams while the Pac-12, West Coast, Mountain West and Sun Belt conferences had one each.

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News-Banner Scoreboard

BASKETBALL

High School Girls

Lawrence North 57, Norwell 55
Penn 37, Valparaiso 17
St. Pius X (Kansas City), Mo. 55, S. Bend St. Joseph's 41

Carroll (Flora) Tournament

Championships
Carroll (Flora) 61, Western 53
Consolation
Tippecanoe Valley 63, Riverton Parke 14

University 65, Western Boone 56
Fifth Place
Tippecanoe Valley 78, University 48

Semifinal
Carroll (Flora) 60, Cass 37
Western 56, Covenant Christian 50

Seventh Place
Western Boone 46, Riverton Parke 44

Third Place
Cass 47, Covenant Christian 28

Delphi Tournament

Championship
Winamac 45, Delphi 40

Fifth Place
Rossville 40, Frankfort 28

Seventh Place
N. Newton 45, Taylor 41

Third Place
N. Montgomery 44, Pioneer 38

Franklin Tournament

Championship
Franklin 57, Carmel 42

First Round
Carmel 41, Castle 35
Zionsville 54, Franklin 49

Third Place
Zionsville 57, Castle 47

Gibson County Classic

Championship
Silver Creek 49, Princeton 31

Fifth Place
Danville 35, N. Posey 27

Seventh Place
Evansville Mater Dei 40, Fairfield, Ill. 23

Third Place
Gibson Southern 61, Wood Memorial 49

Indianapolis Riverside Classic

Bellevue Circle City 43, Indpls Riverside 21

Indpls Herron 59, Indpls Riverside 23

Indpls Herron 65, Bellevue Circle City 22

Knox Tournament

Championship
S. Central (Union Mills) 43, Knox 30

First Round
Knox 41, Griffith 22

S. Central (Union Mills) 38, Elkhart Christian 22

Third Place
Elkhart Christian 33, Griffith 16

Northview Tournament

Championship
Parke Heritage 48, Northview 30

Fifth Place
Clay City 37, Cloverdale 10

Seventh Place
W. Vigo 45, S. Vermillion 10

Third Place
Terre Haute North 54, Greencastle 45

Richmond Tournament

Championship
Floyd Central 54, Jac-Cen-Del 31

Consolation
E. Central 50, Purdue Polytechnic 34

Fifth Place
E. Central 62, Indpls Tech 26

Semifinal
Floyd Central 64, Anderson 50

Seventh Place
Purdue Polytechnic 67, Centerville 55

Third Place
Richmond 68, Anderson 50

Trine University Classic
Elkhart 61, W. Noble 18

Ft. Wayne Northrop 49, Westfield 40

Ft. Wayne South 38, Concord 35

Ft. Wayne South 48, Lakeland 41

Lakeland 61, Ft. Wayne North 55, OT

NBA

All Times EST

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	23	6 .793	—
Philadelphia	20	8 .714	2½
New York	17	12 .586	6
Brooklyn	14	15 .483	9
Toronto	11	18 .379	12

Southeast Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	17	11 .607	—
Miami	17	12 .586	½
Atlanta	12	17 .414	5½
Charlotte	7	20 .259	9½
Washington	5	23 .179	12

Central Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	22	8 .733	—
Cleveland	17	13 .567	5
Indiana	14	14 .500	7
Chicago	13	18 .419	9½
Detroit	2	27 .069	19½

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Southwest Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	17	12 .586	—
New Orleans	17	13 .567	½
Houston	15	12 .556	1
Memphis	9	19 .321	7½
San Antonio	4	24 .143	12½

Northwest Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	22	6 .786	—
Denver	22	10 .688	2
Oklahoma City	18	9 .667	3½

Utah	12	18 .400	11
Portland	7	21 .250	15

Pacific Division

W	L	Pct	GB
Sacramento	17	11 .607	—
L.A. Clippers	17	12 .586	½
L.A. Lakers	16	15 .516	2½
Phoenix	14	14 .500	3
Golden State	15	15 .500	3

Sunday's Games

No games scheduled.

Monday's Games

New York 129, Milwaukee 122
Denver 120, Golden State 114
Boston 126, L.A. Lakers 115
Philadelphia at Miami, 8 p.m.
Dallas at Phoenix, 10:30 p.m.

Tuesday's Games

Brooklyn at Detroit, 7 p.m.
Orlando at Washington, 7 p.m.
Atlanta at Chicago, 8 p.m.
Indiana at Houston, 8 p.m.
Memphis at New Orleans, 8 p.m.
Minnesota at Oklahoma City, 8 p.m.
Utah at San Antonio, 8 p.m.
Sacramento at Portland, 10 p.m.
Charlotte at L.A. Clippers, 10:30 p.m.

Wednesday's Games

Philadelphia at Orlando, 7 p.m.
Toronto at Washington, 7 p.m.
Milwaukee at Brooklyn, 7:30 p.m.
New York at Oklahoma City, 8 p.m.
Phoenix at Houston, 8 p.m.
Cleveland at Dallas, 8:30 p.m.

Thursday's Games

Detroit at Boston, 7:30 p.m.
Dallas at Minnesota, 8 p.m.
Indiana at Chicago, 8 p.m.
Utah at New Orleans, 8 p.m.
Memphis at Denver, 9 p.m.
Miami at Golden State, 10 p.m.
San Antonio at Portland, 10 p.m.
Charlotte at L.A. Lakers, 10:30 p.m.

FOOTBALL

NFL

All Times EST

AMERICAN CONFERENCE

W	L	Pct	PF	PA
x-Miami	11	4 0	.733	463 314
Buffalo	9	6 0	.600	403 276
e-N.Y. Jets	6	9 0	.400	231 315
e-New England	4	11 0	.267	212 322

South

W	L	Pct	PF	PA
Houston	8	7 0	.533	328 331
Indianapolis	8	7 0	.533	354 372
Jacksonville	8	7 0	.533	331 343
e-Tennessee	5	10 0	.333	274 321

North

W	L	Pct	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	11	3 0	.786	384 225
Cleveland	10	5 0	.667	345 311
Cincinnati	8	7 0	.533	318 345
Pittsburgh	8	7 0	.533	257 291

West

W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	9	6 0	.600	333 265	
Denver	7	8 0	.467	327 377	
Las Vegas	7	8 0	.467	285 294	
e-L.A. Chargers	5	10 0	.333	325 369	

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

East

W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	11	4 0	.733	392 366	
x-Dallas	10	5 0	.667	451 286	
N.Y. Giants	5	10 0	.333	214 371	
e-Washington	4	11 0	.267	309 453	

South

W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	8	7 0	.533	326 302	
Atlanta	7	8 0	.467	287 288	
New Orleans	7	8 0	.467	331 297	
e-Carolina	2	13 0	.133	236 381	

North

W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Detroit	11	4 0	.733	412 355	
Green Bay	7	8 0	.467	333 331	
Minnesota	7	8 0	.467	314 299	
Chicago	6	9 0	.400	314 345	

West

W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-San Francisco	11	3 0	.786	425 234	
L.A. Rams	8	7 0	.533	357 332	
Seattle	8	7 0	.533	320 352	
e-Arizona	3	12 0	.200	275 403	

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-Clinched playoff spot
y-Clinched division

Thursday's Games

L.A. Rams 30, New Orleans 22

Saturday's Games

Pittsburgh 34, Cincinnati 11
Buffalo 24, L.A. Chargers 22

Sunday's Games

Atlanta 29, Indianapolis 10
Cleveland 36, Houston 22
Detroit 30, Minnesota 24
Green Bay 33, Carolina 30
N.Y. Jets 30, Washington 28
Seattle 20, Tennessee 17
Tampa Bay 30, Jacksonville 12
Chicago 27, Arizona 16
Miami 22, Dallas 20
New England 26, Denver 23

Monday's Games

Las Vegas 20, Kansas City 14
Philadelphia 33, N.Y. Giants 25
Baltimore at San Francisco, 8:15 p.m.

Thursday, Dec. 28
N.Y. Jets at Cleveland, 8:15 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 30
Detroit at Dallas, 8:15 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 31
Arizona at Philadelphia, 1 p.m.
Atlanta at Chicago, 1 p.m.
Carolina at Jacksonville, 1 p.m.
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Giants, 1 p.m.
Las Vegas at Indianapolis, 1 p.m.
Miami at Baltimore, 1 p.m.
New England at Buffalo, 1 p.m.
New Orleans at Tampa Bay, 1 p.m.
San Francisco at Washington, 1 p.m.
Tennessee at Houston, 1 p.m.
Pittsburgh at Seattle, 4:05 p.m.

Cincinnati at Kansas City, 4:25 p.m.
L.A. Chargers at Denver, 4:25 p.m.
Green Bay at Minnesota, 8:20 p.m.

HOCKEY

NHL

All Times EST

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	32	19	7	6	44	100
Toronto	31	17	8	6	40	115
Florida	33	19	12	2	40	96
Tampa Bay	35	17	13	5	39	118
Detroit	34	16	14	4	36	121
Montreal	33	15	13	5	35	95
Buffalo	35	17	17	4	32	106
Ottawa	29	12	17	0	24	100

Metropolitan Division

GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	32	23	8	1	47	108
N.Y. Islanders	33	16	8	9	41	104
Philadelphia	33	18	11	4	40	102
Washington	31	17	9	5	39	77
Carolina	34	17	13	4	38	111
New Jersey	32	17	13	2	36	109
Pittsburgh	32	15	13	4	34	93
Columbus	35	11	18	6	28	108

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Central Division

GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Dallas	32	20	8	4	44	114
Colorado	34	21	11	2	44	125
Winnipeg	32	20	9	3	43	109
Nashville	34	19	15	0	38	107
Arizona	33	17	14	2	36	103
St. Louis	33	17	15	1	35	100
Minnesota	32	15	13	4	34	100
Chicago	33	10	22	1	21	80

Pacific Division

GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	35	23	9	3	49	135
Vegas	35	21	9	5	47	122
Los Angeles	30	19	7	4	42	107
Calgary	34</					

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4	6	8						
1	8		4	3		6	7	
		9						4
6	9	2	7		3			
8	4							2
5		3			6	4		

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THE TOWN OF Warren is now accepting applications for Operations Manager to oversee all departments of the Town - Water, Sewer, Electric, Street, Park as well as any other duties which could/would be assigned through the Town Council related to Public Works operations. Prior Municipal Work Experience, Managerial Experience, and at least one License preferred but all three not required. Wage based on experience level. Applications can be found online at warrenindiana.us or picked up at Town Hall, 132 N. Wayne Street. Applications and resumes will be accepted until January 15, 2024. Call 260-375-2656 for further information. Town of Warren, Indiana, is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

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Lottery Numbers

Saturday's Drawings HOOSIER LOTTERY
Cash 5 — 08-10-11-18-45
Cash4Life — 13-35-36-38-49, Cash Ball: 01
Lotto Plus — 03-07-19-20-34-40
Quick Draw Midday — 10-12-13-16-17-21-30-34-35-38-41-43-51-53-55-59-68-70-72-79, BE: 79
Daily Three-Midday — 07-05-03, SB: 09
Daily Three-Evening — 02-09-04, SB: 04
Daily Four-Midday — 07-04-05-04, SB: 09
Daily Four-Evening — 09-05-08-00, SB: 04
Quick Draw Evening — 03-05-07-09-11-19-22-23-32-36-47-48-51-55-57-58-60-66-70-74, BE: 05
Hoosier Lotto — 01-21-29-31-32-43
POWERBALL
09-14-17-18-53; Powerball: 06; Power Play: 3X

Sunday's Drawings HOOSIER LOTTERY
Cash 5 — 03-10-23-24-36
Cash4Life — 05-21-23-48-57, Cash Ball: 02
Quick Draw Midday — 02-03-05-09-12-17-22-23-26-40-43-50-51-56-60-64-66-67-72-78, BE: 51
Daily Three-Midday — 04-00-03, SB: 05
Daily Three-Evening — 03-08-01, SB: 05
Daily Four-Midday — 09-08-06-04, SB: 05
Daily Four-Evening — 06-08-04-05, SB: 05
Quick Draw Evening — 09-12-13-15-20-21-29-34-35-37-41-46-53-55-58-59-61-71-77-79, BE: 29
POWERBALL
Estimated jackpot (for Wednesday): \$638 million

Monday's Drawings HOOSIER LOTTERY
Cash 5 — 02-20-37-39-40
Cash4Life — 19-29-48-51-53, Cash Ball: 04
Quick Draw Midday — 01-15-16-21-22-24-26-28-41-43-45-46-47-48-54-56-57-64-72-77, BE: 26
Daily Three-Midday — 00-02-00, SB: 03
Daily Three-Evening — 06-08-08, SB: 09
Daily Four-Midday — 03-03-00-01, SB: 03
Daily Four-Evening — 01-03-05-06, SB: 09
Quick Draw Evening — 01-03-04-15-17-20-21-33-37-38-41-47-53-56-64-66-70-72-76-79, BE: 56
Hoosier Lotto — Estimated jackpot (for Wednesday): \$1.8 million
MEGA MILLIONS
Estimated jackpot (for Tuesday): \$73 million
POWERBALL
09-14-17-18-53 Powerball: 06; Power Play: 3X

SALES & AUCTIONS

Auctions

414 N MERIDIAN ST. PORTLAND, IN 47371 NEW YEAR'S DAY EXTRAVAGANZA SALE! Large 2 Ring Auction! Live & Simulcast Auction. Ring 1 - Antiques, Primitives, Silver Certificates, Vintage Toys, Cast Iron, Furniture, Appliances, Coca-Cola items, pocket knives, costume jewelry, musical instruments. Ring 2 - 2023 Bad Boy Tractors w/ loaders, 2018 Polaris side by side, 2012 Honda motorcycle, 2016 Kawasaki, 2019 Triumph, older International tractor, several firearms, ammo, new Home Depot items, pedal tractors, vintage games, fishing and more! Preview will be Friday, December 29 from 3 to 5. Go to bidbricker.com to start bidding!
Chad Bricker Auctioneer - 260-703-0839 AU11600027
Jan. 01 10:00 AM-5:30 PM
Rain or Shine

Public Sale Calendar

BIDDING STARTS CLOSING DECEMBER 27 - 10 a.m. EST - Whites Meat Market, owner. Complete liquidation. Meat saws, scales, display coolers, retail shelving, stainless sinks and tables, Herring Hall Marvin safe and much more! Auction pick up Dec. 29, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. EST, 46 W 400 S #1, Kokomo, IN. **Krueckeberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, Kjauction.com.
DECEMBER 31-JANUARY 7 - Estate of Mary Lynn Lautzenheiser, seller. Personal property online only auction. John Deere mower, lawn & garden, furniture, Christmas, books, household. Open houses: Jan. 4 from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Jan. 6 from 10 a.m. to noon, 4917 E 100 N., Bluffton, IN. Isaac Stoller, sale manager, **The Steffen Group Inc.**, <http://www.steffengrp.com>, 260-824-3006.
BIDDING ENDS JANUARY 1 - Online only auction - Various consignors, seller. Modeline MCM floor & table lamps and Art Nuevo, Presidential collection, advertising, toys, early Moxie thermometer, 25+ Nativity scenes, antiques, vintage primitives, artifacts, trains, Fenton, Haviland & Franciscan china, antique furniture, military items, salesman samples and miniatures, coins & currency. Preview: Dec. 26 from 3 p.m.-6 p.m. and Dec. 28 from 3 p.m.-6 p.m., 102 South Jefferson, Ossian. Sale manager, Rod Fetters. **The Steffen Group Inc.**, 260-824-3006, www.steffengrp.com.
JANUARY 11 - 6 p.m. - Estate of Mary Lynn Lautzenheiser, seller. 4917 E. 100 N., Bluffton, IN. One-of-a-kind property w/quick access to Bluffton, Decatur, Fort Wayne. Main home was once township school building, and has covered porch walk through to previous dance studio that has potential to be fourth living unit. Property also offers detached two car garage and two-unit apartment building. Open houses: Jan. 4 from 4-6 p.m., Jan. 6 from 10 a.m.-noon. Isaac Stoller, sale manager, **The Steffen Group Inc.**, <http://www.steffengrp.com>, 260-824-3006.
JANUARY 12 - 10 a.m. - Secured creditors & various consignors, owners. 815 Adams St., Decatur. Online only truck and equipment auction. Online bidding only. Offering 500+ lots! 2012-2014 Freightliner M2106 box trucks, dump trucks, day cabs, sleepers, utility trucks, bucket trucks, utility & semi

trailers, SUV's, pickup trucks, 250+ various skid steer attachments, various truck parts, fencing, work benches, tool boxes and much more! Accepting consignments! **Krueckeberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, Kjauction.com.

BIDDING NOW OPEN AND STARTS CLOSING JANUARY 17 - 6 p.m. EST. - Gary Meyer, owner. Online only commercial real estate auction! 1,376 sq. feet building, 2 bay service area, 15'x16' office space, paved parking lot, .46 acre triangle lot located on N. Main Street, (Hwy. 27)! Zoned: Commercial. Year built: 1950. Wabash Township, Section 29, Adams County, Indiana, South Adams School Corp. Auction preview Jan. 8, 4-5 p.m. or by appointment, 617 N. Main St., Geneva. **Krueckeberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, Kjauction.com.

JANUARY 23 - 2-6 p.m. ET - Online - Farm: Susan Dunn Estate. Property Location: Three miles southeast of Markle, IN and Wells Co., Rockcreek Twp. 207.3+/- total acres, high quality farmland, mostly tillable. Tracts 1 & 2: Located on both sides of 200 N between 200 W and 300 W. Tract 3: Located at intersection of 300 N and 500 W. Tract 1: 19.83+/- acres. Tract 2: 110+/- acres. Tract 3: 77.47+/- acres. **Halderman Real Estate & Farm Management**, 800-424-2324, halderman.com, Rick Johnloz, 260-827-8181.

Public Notice

NOTICE
The City of Bluffton Common Council will hold a Special Council Meeting to Administer the Oath of Offices for the newly elected officials. On Monday, January 1, 2024 12:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers, 128 E. Market Street Bluffton, IN 46714.
nb 12/26
hspaxlp

SUDOKU ANSWER

6	7	9	2	8	5	4	1	3
2	9	1	1	9	6	7	8	5
1	8	5	7	1	9	2	6	9
7	1	8	9	9	1	6	2	8
1	9	6	8	7	2	9	8	1
9	8	2	6	1	8	9	1	7
8	1	9	2	7	1	8	9	6
9	6	9	1	8	1	8	7	2
8	2	7	8	6	9	1	9	1

At least 68 killed in central Gaza in airstrike

By WAFSA SHURAFU
and SAMY MAGDY
Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza (AP) — At least 68 people were killed by an Israeli strike in central Gaza, health officials said Sunday, while the number of Israeli soldiers killed in combat over the weekend rose to 17.

Associated Press journalists at a nearby hospital watched frantic Palestinians carry the dead, including a baby, and wounded following the strike on the Maghazi refugee camp east of Deir al-Balah. One bloodied young girl looked stunned while her body was checked for broken bones.

The 68 fatalities include at least 12 women and seven children, according to early hospital figures.

"We were all targeted," said Ahmad Turkomani, who lost several family members including his daughter and grandson. "There is no safe place in Gaza anyway."

Earlier, the Health Ministry in Gaza gave the death toll as 70. The Israeli military had no immediate comment.

As Christmas Eve fell, smoke rose over the besieged territory, while in the West Bank Bethlehem was hushed, its holiday celebrations called off. In neighboring Egypt, tentative efforts continued on a deal for another exchange of hostages for Palestinians held by Israel.

The war has devastated parts of Gaza, killed roughly 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

The mounting death toll among Israeli troops — 156 since the ground offensive began — could erode public support for the war, which was sparked when Hamas-led militants stormed communities in southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 and taking 240 hostages.

Israelis still largely stand behind the country's stated goals of crushing Hamas' governing and military capabilities and releasing the remaining 129 captives. That's despite rising international pressure against Israel's offensive, and the soaring death toll and unprecedented suffering among Palestinians.

HAMAS EXACTS A PRICE

"The war exacts a very heavy price from us, but we have no choice but to continue fighting," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

In a nationally televised speech, Israeli President Isaac Herzog appealed for the country to remain united. "This moment is a test. We will not break nor blink," he said.

There has been widespread anger against his government, which many criticize for failing to protect civilians on Oct. 7 and promoting policies

Egypt floats plan to end Israel-Hamas war. The proposal gets cool reception

CAIRO (AP) — Israel and Hamas on Monday gave cool public receptions to an Egyptian proposal to end their bitter war. But the longstanding enemies stopped short of rejecting the plan altogether, raising the possibility of a new round of diplomacy to halt a devastating Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip.

The Egyptian plan calls for a phased hostage release and the formation of a Palestinian government of experts to administer the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, according to a senior Egyptian official and a European diplomat familiar with the proposal.

The Egyptian official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the proposal, said the details were worked out with the Gulf nation of Qatar and presented to Israel, Hamas, the United States and European governments. Egypt and Qatar both mediate between Israel and Hamas, while the U.S. is Israel's closest ally and a key power in the region.

"We are expanding the fight in the coming days and this will be a long battle and it isn't close to finished," he said.

Hamas has continued to fire rockets into Israel throughout the fighting. Late Monday, it launched a barrage of rockets, triggering air raid sirens in the southern city of Ashkelon. AP video showed what appeared to be several interceptions by Israel's rocket defense system. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The Egyptian proposal falls short of Israel's declared goal of crushing Hamas. It also appears to be at odds with Israel's insistence on maintaining military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war.

But Netanyahu faces heavy domestic pressure to reach a deal to bring home the more than 100 Israeli hostages who remain in captivity in Gaza.

As he vowed to continue the war during a speech in parliament, relatives of the hostages interrupted him and called for their immediate return. "Now! Now!" they shouted.

The rising death toll of Israeli soldiers from the ground operation also threatens to undermine public support for the war. The Israeli military announced the deaths of two more soldiers Monday, bringing the total killed in the war to 156.

Netanyahu's War Cabinet was expected to meet late Monday. It was unclear if they would discuss the Egyptian proposal.

Hamas did not officially react to the proposal. But it is unclear if Hamas would agree to relinquish power after controlling Gaza for the past 16 years.

that allowed Hamas to gain strength over the years. Netanyahu has avoided accepting responsibility for the military and policy failures.

The Israeli military said it had completed the dismantling of Hamas' underground headquarters in northern Gaza, part of an operation to take down the vast tunnel network and kill off top commanders that Israeli leaders have said could take months.

INSIDE GAZA

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the 20,000 Palestinians killed have been women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

On Friday, Israeli airstrikes on two homes in Gaza killed 90 Palestinians,

including dozens from an extended family, according to rescuers and hospital officials. One of the homes, located in Gaza City, became one of the deadliest airstrikes in the war after 76 people from the al-Mughrabi family were killed, said Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense department.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said a 13-year-old boy was shot and killed in an Israeli drone attack while inside al-Amal Hospital in Khan Younis, a part of Gaza where Israel's military believes Hamas leaders are hiding.

An Israeli strike overnight hit a house in a refugee camp west of the city of Rafah, on Gaza's border with Egypt. At least two men were killed, according to Associated Press journalists in the hospital where the bodies were taken.

Finding sisterhood, healing in 'The Color Purple'

By LINDSEY BAHR
AP Film Writer

It's not a secret that Fantasia Barrino did not want to play Celie again. The "American Idol" winner hadn't had the best time doing "The Color Purple" on Broadway.

The protagonist of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells her story of sexual, physical and psychological abuses in the early 20th century South in a series of letters to God. And it was a character she found it difficult to leave behind at the end of the day. Even the prospect of starring in her first major motion picture didn't seem worth it.

But director Blitz Bazawule had a different vision: He wanted to give Celie an imagination. This Barrino found intriguing.

"Once she understood the assignment, she quickly agreed," Bazawule said in a recent interview with The Associated Press.

Now, four decades after "The Color Purple" became a literary sensation and a Steven Spielberg film, the story is on the big screen again. This time it's a grand, big budget Warner Bros. musical starring Barrino, Taraji P. Henson, as the sultry singer Shug Avery, and Danielle Brooks, reprising her Broadway role as the strong-willed Sofia. It opens in theaters nationwide on Christmas.

"I'm glad that I didn't allow my fear of my past experience with Celie, because of where my life was at that time, to hinder me from doing something is great," Barrino said. "I'm riding on a high right now."

Oprah Winfrey is one of several big-name producers on "The Color Purple," alongside Spielberg, Quincy Jones and Scott Sanders. Winfrey got her acting break and first Oscar nomination playing Sofia in the 1985 adaptation, before helping Sanders turn it into a Broadway musical 20 years

later. Bazawule was not an obvious candidate to direct this film, however. The multi-hyphenate Ghanaian artist had received acclaim and recognition for co-directing Beyoncé's visual album "Black is King." The only other film he had under his belt was the micro-budget "The Burial Of Kojo," which was made for less than \$100,000.

But he had ambitious ideas involving large scale musical numbers that would take audiences on a dazzling journey through the history of Black music in America, from gospel to blues to jazz. And, of course, Celie's inner life. He wasn't at all sure he would get it, but he knew the story he wanted to tell.

"I thought, if I could just find a way to show the audience how this Black woman from the rural South was able to imagine her way out of pain and trauma it will debunk a myth that is that people who have dealt with abusing trauma are docile and passive or waiting to be saved," Bazawule said. "If we could just imbue in (Celie) that scale, then that's the version that needed to exist. Thankfully they said yes."

They would have to jump through some hoops, however, to secure the kind of budget (reportedly around \$100 million) that they needed to support the vision, including auditioning Henson, an Oscar-nominated actor, and Brooks, who already had a Tony nomination for her portrayal of Sofia.

"We were not the studio's choices," Henson said. "I just felt some way about having to audition. I'm Academy Award nominated. I had just got finished singing on NBC's 'Annie Live.' But I checked my ego and I did it. I went in as Shug. I found a dress, had a flower in my hair and faux fur stole and I kicked the door down because I didn't want them to ever second guess me again."

For Brooks, it was a six-month

process that had her doubting herself. A lot of the people involved in "The Color Purple" felt the exhaustion of both having to prove themselves yet again, but also wanting to rise to the challenge nonetheless because this film was worth it.

"This is a huge undertaking to be part of," said Brooks. "This movie is about legacy and it's what I've been calling a cinematic heirloom."

Her Broadway production was very minimalist and stripped down, so to be on location in Georgia, around Macon, Savannah, Atlanta and the small town of Grantville, was revelatory.

"My world really opened up because I got to use all of my senses," Brooks said. "I got to explore all of Sofia because now I have a juke joint and I have a dinner table. I have a house. We had a white mob attacking me."

The juke joint was a real set that required a real swamp to be dredged, where they'd stage Shug's showstopper, "Push Da Button."

"It's probably the perfect confluence of my amazing technical and creative teams," Bazawule said.

The film gives a new boldness to Celie and Shug's relationship with one another and more dimensions to the male characters, including Colman Domingo's Mister.

And all carry the weight of responsibility not only to the material and its predecessors, but also to future films made with primarily Black casts at this level.

"It's not the first time I have been in a production of this scale but what matters to me is that it's a Black production and it's a production with Black producer, a Black director, predominantly Black cast," Henson said. "It's like usually we're supposed to make a dollar out of 15 cents. And after 20+ in the game, it's like finally the studio trusted us to deliver."

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