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INTRODUCTION

Continuing a very enjoyable tradition

Who We Are is here again! There is something very special about this publication. We spend a lot of time with our day-to-day work, reporting on what happened yesterday in Wells County. We print the first draft of history. Gathering news, whether it be covering a public meeting, introducing a new not-for-profit executive or highlighting a high school sporting event can become routine.

I love newspapering — an actual word, defined as journalism practiced for newspapers. Newspapering includes more than that in my definition. It includes every aspect of the business. I started newspapering in Columbia City and spent 17 years falling in love with the industry. Our former editor Dave Schultz often said if they cut him open, they won't find blood, it'll be ink in his veins. Dave may have retired but he hasn't lost his love for newspapering either.

Part of newspapering has traditionally included publishing an annual "progress edition" such as Who We Are. I don't know how many newspapers continue that tradition these days, but it will continue to be a staple at the News-Banner. It's part of what makes this newspaper special.

During the first year I worked at the Columbia City newspaper, the progress edition was a huge deal. They changed the theme and the look of the publication every year. Stories revolved around the theme with complimentary design. "People" was the theme that year. That was also the year that attorneys for People Magazine contacted us about the striking similarities between our publication and theirs. I often hear that imitation is the best form of flattery, as long as it doesn't become copy-right infringement.

Progress editions are full of positive, feel-good stories. This year we are adding a twist to that tradition. Alan Daugherty reaches way back in the time machine to look at the impact of Gideon Gerber, born in 1873.

The pages that follow are also packed with stories



Doug Brown
President
and Publisher

that make Who We Are one of the most eagerly anticipated publications of the year.

I hope you find our selections as fascinating as I do.

As always, there are stories about people I know well, people I'm familiar with and people I would like to meet.

A few examples.

Former Bluffton Parks director Pam Vanderkolk was someone who I connected with prior to her retirement in 2020 when she and her husband John began traveling for work and leisure. I ran into Pam at Lowe's one day and before I knew it we had been chatting for more than half an hour. Interesting stuff indeed.

Isaac Stoller is someone I'm familiar with but don't know well. I have long had an interest in auctioneering. My father was a licensed auctioneer, my cousin is an auctioneer and my youngest son, Seth, is a graduate of Reppert's School of Auctioneering. He isn't active in the industry but he is a student of the craft. When I mentioned the feature on Stoller, Seth knew exactly who he was, having studied techniques of many Indiana Auctioneer Champions, including Stoller.

Hannah Gerber is the kind of flight attendant I want to meet and fly with. My wife and I began traveling after our kids graduated high school. We have found the flight crew can make all the difference between enjoying a flight or just getting from point A to point B. I appreciate people who go above the call of duty to make the time more enjoyable. A self-described 'ray of sunshine in the sky,' Hannah and I would definitely bond over our love of tomato juice.

There are many great stories contained in the following pages. Chock full of great people, programs, places and accomplishments that make our community such a special place.

You are sure to learn something new about this great community — without any copyright infringement.

I hope you enjoy the 2024 Who We Are edition. ♦

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BY THE NUMBERS

28,555

Population of Wells County,

12,155

Housing Units

\$68,819

Median Household Income (ranking 28th among the state's 92 counties, putting Wells County well above the state average.

\$51,343

Per capita Income (ranking 52nd)

\$161,300

Median Value

Owner-Occupied Homes

\$600

Median rent, monthly

93.3%

Adults with H.S. education (10th)

19.1%

with B.A. degree or higher (35th)

5,212

School enrollment

Population of
Incorporated Communities
in Wells County:

Bluffton 10,476

Ossian..... 3,382

Markle 1,079

(504 in Wells County)

Zanesville 588

(472 in Wells Co.)

Uniondale 276

Poneto..... 175

Vera Cruz..... 75

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Newsroom

Holly Gaskill, editor • holly@news-banner.com

Advertising

Jim Chilton, sales manager • jimc@news-banner.com



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A groundbreaking ceremony for the Downtown Pathways projects was held Oct. 2, 2023. Work was completed in time for the new alleyways to be in use as the summer begins. Participating in the event were Bluffton NOW! board members, chamber and economic development representatives and representatives of the contractors. In the front, holding shovels from left: Sarah MacNeill, Mark Reinhard, Alyssa Gerber, Rachel Bardsley, Jeremy Penrod, Nick Huffman, Mike Lautzenheiser, Jr., Alyssa Osborn, Rick Johnloz, Kim Gentis and Janella Stronczek. Behind them, from left: Scott Elzey, Brandy Fiechter, Doug Brown, Kim Leas, Audry Dudley, Brandon Wright, Richard Triplett, Kyle Koning, Kira Lee, Steve Linderwell, Chad Kline, and Steve Huggins. (Photo provided)

Pathways project marks another milestone for Bluffton NOW!

By MARK MILLER

The acronym in Bluffton NOW!, the downtown revitalization group formed in 2015, stands for “New, Old and Wonderful.” The Downtown Pathways project certainly fills the bill for the first two: New and Old.

The totally new use of several downtown alleyways uncovered a good deal of old things as the pavement was being demolished and a new base was being installed.

“We uncovered a lot of history,” said Michael Lautzenheiser, Jr., president of the group, “and some unexpected things.” Although there was no evidence of the legendary tunnels that many claim to have once existed in the downtown area, there were plenty of coal chutes and old tiles and utility conduits “and all sorts of other surprises,” he added, such as a gas line where there wasn’t supposed to be one.

As for the “Wonderful,” Lautzenheiser is hopeful that will prove true as well.

“The general consensus is that the project has been well received by the pub-

lic so far. We’ve heard several compliments and we (the Bluffton NOW! group) are really looking forward to seeing the public utilize them,” he said.

— — —

By the time this year’s annual publication is distributed, a grand-opening ribbon cutting will have likely formally opened the three alleyways completed as Phase 1 of the Pathways project. The groundbreaking had taken place Oct. 2, 2023; much of the work was done in less than optimal weather, but the realized goal was to have them open and ready for use this summer.

The project had come out of two other studies the group had completed, one involving updating downtown landscaping, the other concerned downtown parking.

“What we found was that we have plenty of parking,” he explained, but the accessibility between the public parking lots and the Market Street business corridor “was not tied well together.” So the concept was to turn several alleyways

into pedestrian walkways that would be inviting and special.

While there is also on-street parking in the area, a two-hour limit is enforced during weekday business hours. The parking lots offer unlimited free parking. “Getting people from the parking to the business corridor is essential,” he said.

There were five alleyways initially identified in the project, but fundraising efforts and rising costs led the group to choose three alleys for Phase 1. Those costs would come to about \$900,000, all raised by private donations and grants.

“Alley 1” is next to American Salvage in the 100 block of West Market Street.

“We consider this our ‘showcase’ alley,” Lautzenheiser said, noting its “unique lighting, a red ribbon running through the length in the concrete along with games painted into the concrete for kids and families.”

“Alley 2” is in the middle of the 200 block of West Market Street connecting to the public parking lot north of downtown between Perry and Wabash streets. This is

referred to as the “natural” alleyway with “nature-theme screen walls and integrated lighting,” he said. Phase 2 includes plans to add some tables and chairs for people and families to enjoy coffee, ice cream or even an outdoor meal here.

“Alley 3” had originally been a part of the Parlor City Plaza project but not enough funds were raised at the time. It is next to the American Legion post, connecting West Washington Street to the courthouse plaza. “This connects the plaza with the most-used city parking lot,” Lautzenheiser said.

It was also the most problematic alley, by far. In addition to the mystery gas line, other utilities had been encased in concrete, which meant they could not be moved without damaging them. It added somewhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000 to the costs, in addition to time.

The good news is, Phase 2 “will go a lot smoother,” he continued, “now that we know what to look for, we’ll have a better idea of what we’ll find during the demoli-

(Continued on Page 5)

Imagine Early

A new organization works to provide safe childcare and quality education for children

By SYDNEY KENT

Wells County is a community that cares about children. This is apparent through the time, volunteer hours, advocacy efforts, and funding allocated to organizations like United Way, Family Centered Services, Grace and Mercy, Youth for Christ, Campus Life, The Garage, and more. The newest organization to join in this noble endeavor, Imagine Early, aims to impact the youngest citizens in the area.

Imagine Early is a childcare coalition for Adams and Wells counties. According to their newly hired executive director Ashliegh King, they hope to change the childcare landscape by investing in and impacting the infrastructure of early care and education.

Imagine Early is the newest branch under the umbrella of the Northeast Indiana Early Childhood Coalition or NEIECC.

The NEIECC's mission and vision are centered around fostering a region's strong early childhood opportunities and efforts. In addition to Imagine Early, there are also coalition partners in Allen, Huntington, Dekalb, Kosciusko, LaGrange/Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Whitley, and Dekalb counties. King said the need for the organization is abundantly clear.

"The foundation did an assessment," King explained. "Childcare was one of the top four critical areas of need identified. It was just a matter of time to get it started."

According to the assessment, which can be found on the Wells County Foundation website, Wells County had 166 available slots for children at either a licensed center, a home, or a registered ministry in 2009. That number fell by more than half to 72 in 2015. Since then, the capacity has risen to 120 – a significant jump, but still less than the capacity in 2009.

Of the available spots, many families

are unable to afford the cost of care. The childcare landscape is similar in counties throughout the state.

King explained some of her long-term ideas for the Adams-Wells area, as the counties share many employees.

One of her personal goals is to partner with local employers to provide resources for parents in the workforce. For example, when a new employee receives a packet of information about their benefits, King hopes to help employers provide resources from Imagine Early about local licensed childcare facilities, their pricing, quality level, and their availability.

King said much of her efforts will be concentrated on learning from surrounding area directors and following their lead. One plan in the works for all areas under the NEIECC involves implementing a Tri-Share Program. The program will create a shared resource network to support childcare providers by assisting them in improving service quality, obtaining accreditations, and helping with operations.

Licensed providers are limited, and more are needed for families to access available childcare funding through programs like the Childcare Development Fund, CCDF, and On My Way Pre-K.

Another instrumental part of her role is awareness, she explained. For example, she's learned that many in the community did not know that the On My Way Pre-K program is now available at Bluffton-Harrison and Norwell elementary schools. Vouchers are available through Brightpoint.

A website for Imagine Early is in the works, she said. The website will act as a living resource for families in need of childcare, providers, and employers.

Much like its regional counterparts, the Imagine Early coalition also wants to unite families, employers, and childcare providers to create a sustainable solution that benefits all parties involved. ♦



Ashliegh King, the first Executive Director for Imagine Early. (Photo by Sydney Kent)



The planning team bringing "Shrek the Musical, Jr." and "Jungle Book Kids" to the stage for Creative Arts Theatre are, from left, Julie Redner (Make-up and Costumes), Ted Smith (Executive Producer), Janice Lipsey (Executive Director of the Creative Arts Council), Ainsley Werich (Production/Properties Manager), Lexie Caudell (Shrek Jr. Director) and Renee Preston (Jungle Book Kids Director). (Photo provided)

Creative Arts Council of Wells Co. celebrating 50 years of activities

By BARBARA BARBIERI

The Wells County Creative Arts Council is celebrating its 50th year of offering the community the opportunity of attending theater, dance and musical programs as well the viewing of art exhibitions, with a celebration event being planned for this fall.

The council came into being as a group of citizens — including then-Bluffton Mayor Bill Fryback — who saw the need for cultural programs in Wells County in 1973. The group was incorporated in 1974 and found a site in the former home of Dr. Mead in the 200 block of West Washington Street (now the library's parking lot).

Several sites have been home to the council including a building in the 100 block of West Washington St., then the Caylor-Nickel Foundation building on North Main St., the Wells County Commerce & Visitors Center on Water Street (2004-2022) and the current site with auditorium space at 428 South Oak St.

Entrance to the office and lobby area is through Door 10 on the building's west side, with ample parking by the entry. The hallway features a bulletin board of events and photos of past theater productions. A handicapped entrance to the office and to the theater is through Door 1 on the east side, also beside ample parking.

Over the years Creative Arts has offered programming in ballet, theater, drawing and painting, culinary arts, art exhibitions, concerts and so much more.

Currently the organization focuses on four facets: dance, music, theatre and visual arts.

A Summer Theater Intensive program in June is bringing acting experiences to students with the presentations of "Shrek the Musical, Jr." (ages 12 to 18) and Disney's "The Jungle Book Kid" (ages 8-11). Over 90 students ages seven to 18 have been involved.

Also offered again this year is the Summer Dance Intensive from June 3-21 with classes for ages 3 to 18 in creative dance, pre-dance and advanced dance.

A new theater education offering for young thespians this July is the Early Stages Workshop (July 22-26). This program is geared for elementary-aged students (ages 7-11) who want to focus on acting or are wanting to learn more about theater and what it has to offer. Instructor will be Ainsley Werich. Also being offered are drum and guitar lessons.

Community Partners for the current year include: Patrons (\$1,000 or more support): Alpha Eta chapter of Psi Iota Xi (Bluffton), First Bank of Berne, National Oil & Gas, Inc., Welches All Vehicle Repair. and Friends (\$500 or more support): Adams Wells Internet Telecom TV, A Perfect Blend, Family Ford of Bluffton, Honegger, Ringger & Co., Les Gerber Insurance and Linder Oil Company.

Currently, Janiece Lipsey is Executive Director and Tammy Fay is Creative Service Director.

Creative Arts Council members include: Ted Smith, president; Mike Downey, vice president; John Emshwiller, treasurer; Meagan VandeLaar, secretary; Julie Harvey, Nancy Wagner, Eric Blessing, Ted Chemey, Natasha Gilgen and Jeanette Lundeen. ♦

(Continued from Page 3)

tion process.”

The second phase will convert two other alleyways, one in the 100 block of East Market Street between Market and Perry streets, the other next to the Wells County Foundation building on West Market, although this one will be designed to remain open to vehicle traffic as well. This phase will also include “more amenities and artwork for all five alleys,” he said.

The fundraising drive for Phase 2 was announced earlier this month and includes a \$100,000 matching challenge grant from the Wells County Foundation. The goal for this project is between \$600,000 and \$700,000, Laustzenheiser said. They will be pursuing some state grants in addition to seeking private donations and grants.

The ongoing maintenance of the alleys will be a “partnership” between the city and Bluffton NOW!, he explained. “There is ongoing discussion, and it appears the city will utilize a portion of its annual funding of the Community Reinvestment Program.”

The grassroots organization which now operates under the umbrella of the Wells County Chamber of Commerce will be marking its 10th year in 2025. Downtown occupancy was somewhere near 80% when they began. It stood at 85% in 2019 and as of the end of '23, stood at 95%. Second floor occupancy now stands at 71%.

“Last year, we crossed the threshold of 100 businesses in downtown Bluffton,” he said. “Today, that number is 119, and there are going to be some more announced here shortly.” ♦



Bluffton NOW! leader Mike Lautzenheiser, Jr. at the south entrance to the alleyway next to American Salvage in downtown Bluffton. “We consider this our ‘showcase’ alley,” he says. (Photo by Mark Miller)

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Solar eclipse draws thousands to Wells County

By HOLLY GASKILL

Schools closed, roads came to a standstill, and for nearly three minutes, everyone in Wells County looked up toward the sky.

On April 8, almost all of Wells County fell into the path of a likely once-in-a-lifetime solar eclipse. The natural phenomenon won't occur again in North America until 2045 and won't pass through Wells County until 2099.

"That was the best two-and-a-half minutes of my life," said Jeremy Brown, a then 7th-grade student watching from the football field at Bluffton High School. "And I definitely want more people to experience that. That was really, really cool."

Businesses and organizations throughout Wells County drew crowds to view the sight — many of which were from Allen County, which fell just outside the path of totality. However, visitors came from throughout the U.S. and the globe to view the eclipse. The News-Banner heard from visitors from England, Ireland, Scotland and Italy.

Simon and Karen Pryke traveled from Cambridge, England, to stay at Ouabache for the weekend. "We're from a small country town in the UK." Simon Pryke explained. "So big cities are nice for like a day or a weekend at the most, but I just like the countryside better."

Preceding the event, the governor's office estimated 20,000-50,000 tourists would either pass through or visit Wells County for the solar event. While measuring the specific outcome is difficult, the county's Flock cameras offer a fair estimation. The cameras, which register license plates to identify stolen vehicles or active warrants, are positioned at the major entry points of Wells County.

On April 8, the cameras registered roughly 12,000 vehicles entering Wells County — according to Sheriff Scott Holliday, the cameras typically register just 5,000 license plates on a typical high-traffic day. Assuming many of those vehicles were traveling with more than one person — and that potentially more vehicle traveled into the county on non-major roadways — Wells County easily met the expected threshold.

At the very least, it was impossible to deny Wells County was packed.

Ouabache State Park announced it was at capacity just after noon. Cars followed suit by parking along the nearby Rivergreenway or taking up parking spots at Bluffton-Harrison schools. Archbold-Wilson Park in Ossian reported over 800 visitors and more settled in unofficial gatherings



Left: Maddox, Meg and Elijah Sorg lay back on the Bluffton High School football field to view the eclipse. Above: As the total solar eclipse cast the area in a sudden dusk, Tyson Brooks (center) looks up in awe and photographs the sky. The 3-minute darkness triggered the automatic lights of the parking lot, shown in the background. (News-Banner file photos)

at various parks throughout Wells County.

Paul and Colleen Henry flew from Las Vegas to see their third solar eclipse. "We had to come," she said. The couple ended up at the Caylor-Nickel Foundation Family YMCA, where visitors were overflowing into neighboring parking lots and walking over.

Jeff Schurman said he and his family decided to view the total eclipse after seeing a partial eclipse at their Michigan home in 2017. Bluffton was one of the closest spots to do so.

His wife, Robin, said the trip was well worth it. "I started tearing up," she said about the first moments of totality.

Bluffton-Harrison Middle School also participated in a special weather balloon launching with Manchester High School, Quest for Stars, Starlink and Blue Origin. The students banded together to send off a gigantic balloon, carrying equipment to photograph the eclipse's shadow on Earth. Blessed by good weather, the day was marked as a success as the balloon eventually landed just 10 minutes north of Bluffton, Ohio.

Altogether, the day was marked as a success, putting a national spotlight — or more accurately, a lack thereof — on Wells County for a day.

As the Wells County Convention and Visitors Commission would later debrief the day, member Steve Higgins quipped, "We should do this every other year." ♦



Students launch an 'eclipse balloon'

Shown at left, Manchester and Bluffton students help secure a large helium balloon as others attach equipment that will photograph the eclipse's shadow on the earth. The balloon took off from Bluffton High School and eventually landed just north of Bluffton, Ohio. (News-Banner file photo) An image from the balloon is shown below. (Photo provided)



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Wells County Trails builds momentum

Bluffton's Rivergreenway is the most popular trail in the county and is often cited as an amenity to local homebuyers. A trail counter installed on the trail showed it had more than 56,000 visits in 2023.

By TANYA ISCH CAYLOR

Most people associate trails with fitness and recreation.

But the push to expand trail networks, both locally and on a larger scale, are increasingly about helping people get where they want or need to go.

"I love to see families out riding their bikes on the trails," says Mike Lautzenheiser, Jr., president of Wells County Trails. "But it's really neat to see the trails used for transportation."

Thirty years after the construction of Bluffton's Rivergreenway, there finally seems to be a groundswell of momentum to pursue projects linking the county's recreation sites as well as its population centers.

- Construction is under way on the Interurban Trail Extension to Lancaster Park — an idea initially discussed in the 1990s that is finally coming to fruition now that there is an exciting recreation center north of town, with a pickleball court and an 18-hole disc golf course among its amenities.

- Work is expected to begin soon creating a Paddlesports access site at Vera Cruz, including a parking lot and a ramp similar to the access site at the White Bridge.

- A grant has also been secured to hire an engineering firm to design a trail along State Road 124.

Underlying all of these projects is a long-range regional plan to link Ouabache State Park with Pokagon State Park near Angola. The 81-mile trail will enhance recreation and tourism opportunities and is expected to have an economic impact on all four counties involved.

A well-traveled path

Of all the projects on his radar, one of Lautzenheiser's favorites is perhaps the most underrated.

The Interurban Trail, connecting

downtown Bluffton to Walmart, doesn't offer much in the way of scenery once you cross the river on the pedestrian bridge at Kehoe Park. It's not a go-to for fitness enthusiasts unless they happen to live nearby.

But Lautzenheiser isn't just a fan because the trail provides a safe avenue for his family to bike from their home in Willowbrook to get ice cream downtown.

As executive director of the Area Plan Commission, he loves the fact that it helps people who don't have cars get where they need to go, whether that's to work, to go shopping or to get to the library or city government buildings.

Though trail counters installed two years ago show the Interurban Trail has less traffic than Bluffton's Rivergreenway, its traffic is more consistent.

In the middle of the night, in the middle of a snowstorm, "someone is always going somewhere on the Interurban Trail," Lautzenheiser says. "There are roads in Wells County that don't get that much usage."

Creating opportunities

Lautzenheiser expects the trail along State Road 124 east of Main Street, which does not yet have an official name, to provide much the same benefit as the Interurban Trail — enabling people who live in housing along that stretch of road to safely walk or ride their bikes into town.

In some cases, that might help someone get a job who previously was unable to work due to transportation issues. They would then have more money to plug into the local economy. Meanwhile, everyone who uses the trail will be getting more exercise, benefitting the overall health of the community.

The State Road 124 trail will also enhance recreational opportunities by forming part of what is expected to eventually be a loop connecting Ouabache



Mike Lautzenheiser, Jr., center, looks over a map of the area that could be served by a proposed trail along Ind. 124 with local residents who attended a meeting at Kingdom Academy in September 2022. The Wells County Foundation recently approved a grant to pay for the engineering work on the trail. (News-Banner file photos)

State Park to Bluffton along both sides of the Wabash River.

There is already a mountain bike trail along the east bank of the river. Lautzenheiser said it's unclear whether that side of the loop would hug Elm Grove Road or wind along the river. Given that the city owns a large chunk of property on that side of the river, however, provides options.

What he does know is that the S.R. 124 trail will be more difficult to construct than the Interurban Trail due to uneven surfaces and grade changes on the side of the road.

"We're looking for some creative engineering to help with that," he said.

A recent grant from the Wells County Foundation will fund the trail's design. Once that work is complete — potentially by the end of this year or early 2025 — "we'll be ready to go look for funding to build it," he said.

Moving past 'Not in my backyard'

There's often a perception, when a new trail is proposed, that the increased foot traffic will lead to increases in crime and trash while lowering property values.

"With new projects, there's always lots of doubt and fears," Lautzenheiser notes. But he cites "study after study" that shows the exact opposite is true:

- Trails actually lower crime, because there are more people watching and policing the area.

- Property values actually increase the closer they are in proximity to a trail, which many home buyers view as an amenity.

- Moreover, trails tend to attract groups of citizens who make it a project to keep them clear of trash. "It's a fun byproduct" of the social ecosystem that springs up along a trail, Lautzenheiser says.

More funding available

The good news is, there is more funding available to extend and connect trail networks these days — for "blueways"

such as kayaking routes on the rivers as well as conventional paved trails.

The Paddlesports access site at Vera Cruz, for instance, received grants from the Indiana Housing and Community Development Corporation, the Wells County Foundation and the Caylor-Nickel Foundation. A large number of corporate and private sponsors also contributed, as did the AARP.

The Indiana Department of Transportation, which used to focus exclusively on roads, now includes trail networks in its planning, said Lautzenheiser. INDOT helped pay for Phase I of the Interurban Trail, and a \$404,000 grant from Governor Eric Holcomb's Next Level Trails Initiative is funding the bulk of Phase II. INDOT is also funding a future project extending sidewalks on Bluffton's south side all the way to Kroger, he said.

Besides making shopping more accessible to city dwellers, this route will also connect to Whicker Park and the nine-hole disc golf course on the Bi-County Services campus across from Kroger, which already has sidewalks.

Looking ahead

Lessons learned on each project help reduce the learning curve on future projects. Dealing with wetlands permits needed for the Vera Cruz Paddlesports Access

(Continued on Page 40)



Renelle Stauffer and her children heading home after picking up trash along the Rivergreenway on a sunny Saturday morning in November 2023. Left to right are Issac, Renelle, Hannah and Christian. Though people sometimes fear trails will lead to increased crime and trash, studies show the opposite is true: Trail users tend to help police the area and keep it free of trash.

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Golf marks a century in the Parlor City

By MARK MILLER

When a company or organization reaches its century mark — 100 years of existence — one might think it's on stable ground, poised to continue its ongoing success. But there is definitely something different about the golf business.

A search through the old Parlor City Country Club's records and News-Banner archives reveal constant struggles with finances. Today, the county's only 18-hole golf course goes by Timber Ridge Golf Course, the "country club" label and mystique a thing of the past. Sort of. Current owner, golf professional, academy instructor, head greenskeeper, course re-designer, general manager and golf cart and course mechanic Bruce Imel will tell you that the concept of the course being "private" and "snobbish" is one of the hurdles he continues to face.

In April 1924, a group of local business people came together with the purpose of creating a golf course. They purchased 80 acres of land from W.A. "Jake" Fackler on County Road 250 North, then known as Fackler Road. They routed out nine holes and called it the Bluffton Country Club. The original clubhouse appears to have been built soon afterwards and the first golf pro was brought on board — Justus W. Webber.

Jack Frost — that was his real name — became head pro in 1930 and stayed until 1945. It cost 65 cents to play nine holes.

In 1946, the Parlor City Country Club was officially formed as a nonprofit organization and purchased the land from its title holders for \$5,300. Mickey Ludwig was named as the new professional; and new level of membership was created for teenagers, who could play the course for just \$5 a year.

Play was opened to the public for the first time in 1951 due to the club's financial losses. Green fees were 75 cents on weekdays, \$1 on Saturdays and \$1.50 on Sundays. It is not recorded as to when, but the course reverted back to private, although stories suggest that local non-members could play at least a limited number of times, and out-of-county golfers could get a tee time as well.

In 1962, the club members looked to expand the course to 18 holes. An article in the April 14 News-Banner was headlined "Country Club Planning 18 Hole Golf Course, Clubhouse, 12 Acre Lake; Money is Problem." An additional 40 acres was donated by Dr. Chad Caylor and local businessman Ware Baker, the



These two undated photos of the original clubhouse at what was the Parlor City Country Club. The photo at right includes the addition completed in the 1970s and was likely taken just before its demolition in 1996. (Photos provided)

new holes were said to have cost \$53,000. While they originally hoped it could be completed in three years, the new holes did not open for play until 1967. Part of that plan included selling off housing lots on the west end and along the north boundaries to help pay for the new holes, which resulted in several new homes there. Bob Wiley was the club pro and manager when it all began, but Rollie Wolfcale was in that role by the time the project was finished. The 12-acre lake became a five-acre pond and the clubhouse plans were scrapped.

Instead, an expansion of the clubhouse was completed in the early 1970s. The effort was reportedly driven by a need to attract more members and revenue. It didn't work. Although the cost cannot be determined, it added further financial burdens to the club which continued to struggle to make ends meet. The club hired Tom Kunneke in 1976; he had been the pro at Fairview Golf Course in Fort Wayne; he would stay in that position until 1997.

In the mid-1980s, the club's board felt that irrigating the fairways, as most other golf courses had done, would attract new members. The cost was estimated at \$120,000, but banks balked at loaning the money unless members came up with one-third of the cost. It was completed in 1986, but the debt would never be fully paid off.

Nevertheless, as that debt was dwindling down to about \$30,000 according to one former member, there was a push by a number of members for a new, modern clubhouse they felt would attract more new members. The cost of doing that included re-designing several holes and eventually totaled \$1.5 million, financed by a few members



Current club pro and owner Bruce Imel doing what he admits he loves most: working with students in his Imel Golf Academy. Above, Imel and (from left) Deaken Peeper and Daxtin Peeper watch Maxton Simmerman working on his chipping skills. (Photo by Mark Miller)

and a bank loan, a debt load that would cause the club to fold in 2004. The next several years brought a host of changing names and faces as the course struggled to produce even a break-even cash flow.

A golf course management group, the R.H. West Co. out of Indianapolis, agreed to take on the debt service and manage the course, which is when its name changed to Timber Ridge and was "officially" a public course, open to daily green-fee play. West committed to install cart paths — and solicited and received donations from longtime club members

to do that — but was unable to finish them properly due to financial problems. They gave up two years later and a local businessman, Ron Covington, gave it a try. The challenges of running and maintaining an 18-hole golf course, along with the 15,600-square-foot clubhouse's basic utilities and overhead costs and the still-existing debt-service held by what was then the Markle State Bank, proved to be too much.

A bank foreclosure — reluctant as the bank's directors most certainly were — loomed; prospective buyers from outside

of the community balked. The end of an 18-hole course in Bluffton appeared at hand as 2009 began.

On the eve of that happening however, local businessman John Roembke and the Bob Imel family — Bob and his sons Blaine, Brian, Bruce and Brent — stepped in and took over the debt service, ownership and operations. Bob and Bruce Imel's brothers would eventually relinquish their financial interest. In the wake of the pandemic during 2021 and 2022, Roembke and Bruce Imel finalized an arrangement to transfer full ownership to Imel.

There had been many experiments and efforts to utilize the clubhouse and make the entire package profitable, all without success. Determined to continue the course's operations, the two men devised a plan to boost revenue and reduce expenses. The plan allowed Roembke to exit the business and give the property a chance to remain a golf course. This required selling off parcels — again on the west and north sides — and a re-design of the 18-hole layout, conceived and essentially completed by Imel.

"I think there appears to be one theme that dominates the narrative of the past 100 years," Imel said as the course's century mark approached. "The decisions were driven by people who wanted a social club. Most of the investments, historically, were earmarked towards that social aspect and not the golf course. It is quite apparent to me that the majority of the people in the community were not interested in supporting the social aspects, so the course was always left to try and carry the weight of the social experiments, which shortchanged what the PCCC was really started out to be in the beginning: a golf course."

Today, the clubhouse conundrum seems to have been solved by Imel's decision to lease the bulk of the building to Don and Tera Nuttle who operate Timber Ridge Catering and Flex Fitness. The arrangement is proving to be a win-win for Imel and the Nuttles. He is now able to totally focus his attention on the course, a place where he essentially grew up.

When his oldest brother Blaine entered high school and was showing a proficiency in golf, their father purchased a family membership at Parlor City Country Club. Bruce would have been about six years old at the time. Essentially, he would spend more time at the course during the summer months than anywhere else including, perhaps, home.

It was during the next 40 years that the

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2024 is our 10th Anniversary!



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50 runs

Parlor City Trot's golden anniversary getting statewide attention.

By JONATHAN SNYDER

From Bluffton Free Street Fair weekend to Labor Day weekend, the Parlor City Trot is an event focused on bringing the town together through competition and community support.

The running of “the Trot” on August 30 will mark its golden anniversary. According to the Bluffton Parks Facebook page, this year’s running is a Fort Wayne Runner’s Club points-paying event and, in a first for the Trot, the Indiana chapter of the Road Runners Club of America’s state half marathon championship race. The race will also have a \$5,000 total purse.

The Trot started in 1975, with only a 10-kilometer and half-marathon race offered, in the middle of the running boom of the 1970s. This makes it one of the oldest and longest-running half marathons in the state. The idea came from Willie DeFabio, who moved to the area in 1974. DeFabio wanted to organize something special for Bluffton, and proposed the half-marathon idea.

Running in competitive events became

a lot more popular during the 1970s. Doug Sundling, who wrote a retrospective for the Trot’s 30th anniversary, ran in the event during its early years. Sundling stated that the backdrop of the Bluffton Free Street Fair gave the Trot extra intrigue and more unique events for people to come and see.

“A lot of us structured our lives around those road races. And it was a wonderful camaraderie,” Sundling said. “So, that was the nice thing about the street fair venue ... it was a venue that people could come visit and partake of.”

DeFabio went to the Bluffton Free Street Fair Association and asked if he could put on his half-marathon during Street Fair weekend. In Sundling’s retrospective book on the Trot, he quoted DeFabio saying they “looked like they had no clue why people would run 13 miles.”

DeFabio got two friends to help him organize the event. Tom Licking, who ran a menswear store at the time, was responsible for getting community volunteers to



Maria Cline, left, excitedly treks on, while Megan Shantz gives chase during last year’s running of the Parlor City Trot. (Photo provided)

ensure the event ran smoothly. Glenn Talbert, then the director of the Police Athletic League, helped with designing the course. DeFabio’s role involved getting permission from the city and Street Fair Association to run the event.

“Well, as long as I didn’t have to run in it, I thought it was a great idea,” Talbert laughed. “And frankly, that was in my major (being involved in) parks and recreation administration, it was something

that I thought would be a good idea.”

The trio would take a measuring wheel and run it outside of a car to lay out the course. According to Talbert, they did not have to make many adjustments once their initial sweep was completed. Talbert wanted to make something that would be memorable for the runners to go through, which is where Talbert got the idea to run through Ouabache State Park.

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Bluffton’s newest park nearing completion

By DAVE SCHULTZ

The construction of two projects — Lancaster Park and the extension of the Interurban pedestrian and bicycle trail through the north side of Bluffton — is moving forward and it’s possible both of the city’s newest accoutrements could be available for use this fall.

Brandy Fiechter, superintendent of the Bluffton Parks and Recreation Department, is hoping they’ll both be ready sometime in midsummer or soon thereafter. She’s reluctant to set a specific date, given potential weather delays and other factors, but when she was asked for a potential timetable, that’s what she said.

Both projects have been several years in the making. The city had drawn up potential plans for improvements to Lancaster Park in the mid-2010s, but for several years, the only thing that was present at the park was a sledding hill of modest height. Bluffton Fire Department personnel came out a few years ago in the summer and put water on vinyl to provide a bit of joy,



Work on the Interurban Trail Extension began in April as crews began digging and leveling out the trail. (News-Banner file photo)

Jackson St. (Wells County Road 300N) on the site of the former Lancaster School. The Norwell School Corporation still technically owns the land but has agreed to a long-term lease with the city. Fittingly enough, the

a makeshift slip ‘n’ slide, and squirt gun and water balloon fights have been scheduled there.

Water, meanwhile, has presented a problem this spring. Fiechter said she’s been told that 2024 has been the wettest spring since 1944 — 80 years ago. It’s delayed progress on both the park and the Rivergreenway extension.

The 17.3-acre park is at 200 E.

Lancaster Central Elementary School is across Jackson Street from the park..

Currently, the parking lot — formerly a gravel turn-in off of Jackson Street — is being revamped. Three lighted pickleball courts and a large human foosball site are being developed.

- They’ll join other facilities, including:
- A half-mile walking trail with benches.
 - A pavilion with restrooms.
 - A lighted basketball court with six baskets, named in honor of Dick and Dave Troxel.
 - A dual-use football/soccer field.
 - A dual-use nine-hole disc golf/foot golf course.
 - A Gaga ball pit.
 - Two sand volleyball courts.
 - Two permanent cornhole targets.
 - A playground.
 - A solar charging station.
 - A fire pit.
 - A bicycle repair station with air pumps.

It should also be noted that the sledding hill remains intact.

Fiechter says it’s possible that more items could be added, but she’s leery of using up too much of the

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'Memory Kits' highlight new offerings at WCPL

By **BARBARA BARBIERI**

What's new at the Wells County Public Library you may ask? And the answer is "a lot of new items, services and databases" that are helping the library to expand on its mission to "provide the community with access, knowledge and growth."

So with the assistance of Emily Marshall, the library's community relations manager, let us tell you about some of them starting with Memory Kits which came about as Ossian Branch Assistant Manager Julie Christian saw the need for having something to interact with her own parents, who had dementia and Alzheimer's disease. She researched relevant materials and came up with ideas for the kits with the help of the library's Media Service Manager, Jackie Dailey and received donations to help start and then maintain the kits in honor of her mother.

Library card holders can check them out for seven days at a time from either the Ossian Branch or the Main Library. Among the kits with different themes available are: 1950s, 1960s, Beach, Bird/butterflies, Dogs, Farm, Handyman, Homemaker and Travel.

All kits are specifically designed for adults and caregivers to work with those having memory issues. (The library will accept monetary donations for Memory Kits that will allow for the purchase of additional kits with different themes and to maintain the collection.)

Kanopy

This service offers more than 30,000 films that can be streamed and include critically acclaimed movies, inspiring documentaries, award-winning foreign films and more. They can be accessed free with your library card from the Kanopy app or at wellscountylibrary.kanopy.com.

There are things for all ages from Kanopy Kids to non-English language movies and Lifelong learning from PBS.

Outdoor locker pick-up

Patrons may arrange for outdoor locker pickup at the Main Library, Ossian Branch and at outside door 10 at Southern Wells Schools. Complete directions on how to use this service are available at wellscolibrary.org or by calling the library at (260) 824-1612.

Book recommendation emails

In April of 2024 the library began offering Book Recommendation emails that will be sent monthly. To sign up, just go to the "Reading Recommendations" page under the "Services" tab on the library website (wellscolibrary.org). All you have to do is enter your email address

and then select the subjects or genres you are interested in receiving book recommendations for. Your personalized list will be emailed on the 15th of each month.

Events calendar & room reservations

In May 2024 the library upgraded their calendar and room reservation software allowing patrons to go directly to wellscounty.librarycalendar.com.

Featured events will be at the top of the page. You can then filter events by age group, program type, library branch, event type, restoration type and more. Events that require pre-registration will contain a pencil icon to click on to sign up. You also can ask for a reminder before the event occurs.

Clicking on "Reserve a Room" will bring up information on room availability and information on how to reserve a space.

Languages learning programs

Mango Languages is an online language-learning platform that offers more than 70 language programs. You can use the program for free with your library card. Access on the library website (wellscolibrary.org) or via the Mango Languages app. There are also tutorials on the app in the "Little Pim" section that are geared specifically for ages 1-5.

Mango also features a section on English as a Second Language (ESL) with a multitude of tutorials that can help non-English speakers.

Scholastic teachables

This new resource offers teacher-created lesson plans, study guides and printables from a trusted source. Parents and teachers can sort by either grade level (pre-K up to grade 8), subject, theme, type, genre or mini-books. It's a great source for elementary school educators as well as homeschool families. To access, go to "Children" and then "Fun Websites" at wellscolibrary.org.

Except for the renting of a room at the library, all of these services are free to Wells County residents who have a library card.

Library hours

Main Library: Monday through Thursday: 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Saturday: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Ossian Branch: Monday through Thursday: 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday: 9 a.m. to noon.

To access the library online to go: www.wellscolibrary.org for digital books, magazines, online databases, event information and more. ♦



Memory Kits are a new service being offer by the Wells County Public Library, thanks to Ossian librarian Julie Christian who saw the need for the service as she worked with her parents who had dementia and Alzheimer's disease. (Photo provided)

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Who We Are

“After I discovered 14 Civil War soldiers had also been buried there, I thought, ‘The neglect of this cemetery is disrespectful of those veterans.’”

— Larry Heckber



The Heckber Family gathers during the re-dedication of the cemetery May 18.

A Heckber family project results in a restored, historic cemetery

By GLEN WERLING

The gentle southerly breezes sway the upper branches of cottonwood trees causing cottonwood fluff to lazily drift northward like summertime snow across the Old Ossian Cemetery. It's peaceful and blissfully quiet here.

And for years it had been neglected.

“After checking out Ancestry.com and Find-A-Grave, I found my great-great-grandmother Lanah Heckber was buried there. I didn't know she existed,” said Larry Heckber.

And thus began a two-year endeavor by Heckber and his family to restore this cemetery tucked in an out-of-the-way location on Ossian's near southwest side.

“The restoration started because I wanted to give my great-great-grandmother a proper burial site,” Heckber said. “She was family I never knew. Someone needed to show her some respect. I couldn't expect anyone else to take care of her.”

It was an enormous task. Gravestones had toppled from vandalism and neglect. Some of the stones had even been tossed down a small embankment. The wrought-iron fence that once surrounded the cemetery was half buried in the middle of the grounds. The soil over areas where graves were located had sunk with time as their contents turned to dust.

Although the township paid to keep the area mowed, the increasingly uneven

terrain and toppled stones made maintenance difficult. Gradually, the entire cemetery was returning to nature.

“After I discovered 14 Civil War soldiers had also been buried there, I thought, ‘The neglect of this cemetery is disrespectful of those veterans,’” Heckber said. That furthered his resolve.

Heckber shared the idea of the restoration with the rest of his family. They enthusiastically agreed to pitch in.

“I asked my brother Dave to look at the cemetery,” Heckber recalled. One look and brother Dave agreed that something needed to be done. “Dave became the lead person on the project. He used his backhoe to clean the brush and dig up stumps,” Heckber said. Brother Dave admitted it was a labor of love.

Brother Steve repaired the fence around the cemetery. Brother Gene repaired 78 tombstones, which included placing three-foot footers under the larger tombstones. Nephew Deke cut down dead trees and trimmed other trees that had become overgrown. Brother Tom removed brush and repaired tombstones. Daughter Kris Dohrman applied for grants to help pay for the restoration and took care of legal matters. Heckber's daughter, Melissa Sink, used social media to help gain area support for the project and keep others informed of the progress of the restoration.

“Altogether, about 30 Heckbers helped

in the cleanup and tombstone restorations,” Heckber said.

“The only other help we received was from a Boy Scout troop from Bluffton and a friend of mine, who all worked one day,” Larry Heckber said. He added, “Jerri Lehman was a member of the board for Old Ossian Cemetery Restoration. She did a lot of research and got the state permits required to dig in the cemetery. She was a very important part of the project.”

Heckber also contracted Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration LLC of Nashville, Ind. “They found and repaired 41 tombstones that we couldn't find,” Heckber said.

Heckber admitted that researching the cemetery became quite a task. He was able to determine that 86 of the people who were listed as being buried at the Old Ossian Cemetery had actually been moved to new graves in the Oak Lawn Cemetery on Ossian's south side.

Also, many of the stones had eroded so much over time that reading the information on them was difficult. That required Heckber to further research the names and dates of birth and death that belonged to the unreadable stones.

The family organized work days to tackle the tasks. Many a Saturday found the normally quiet cemetery to be a beehive of activity as Heckbers tackled that day's assigned tasks with an organized zeal an ant would envy.

“We really made no plans. We decided one day we would do this task, and another day we would do that one,” Heckber said.

“I thought it would take four years to restore and research the cemetery. Our family was able to restore the cemetery in two years,” Heckber said. “I've also spent two years off-and-on researching the cemetery, and I figure I have about another year to go,” he added.

“If we would have hired everything done it would have cost \$120,000,” Heckber said, adding, “We received a grant from the Wells County Foundation for \$16,000. Ellis and Marilyn McFadden donated \$10,000. About another \$10,000 came from other donors. Jefferson Township budgeted \$16,000. The balance was labor and equipment, which was all donated by the Heckber family.”

The restoration culminated with the re-dedication of the cemetery May 18.

“About 150 people attended the ceremony. There were four Civil War re-enactors that performed three musket volleys. We had a bagpipe player. Children said the Pledge of Allegiance. My niece and her son sang patriotic songs. There was an invocation given by Andrew Morton, pastor of the Ossian Presbyterian Church,” recalled Heckber.

And the keynote speaker was State Representative Matt Lehman (R-Berne), dressed in a Civil War uniform.

The restoration includes a monument garden close to the main entrance with monuments supplied by The Monument Center in Bluffton. "Brian and Allen Steffen were instrumental in designing and installing the monuments," Heckber said.

Footstones bearing only the initials of the dead join with other pavers to form a plaza for the monuments. One monument lists all of the people who have been documented as being buried in the cemetery. The other monument specifically lists the Union Civil War soldiers buried in the cemetery. There is a lit flagpole with a stone that was dedicated in 1930 to Wells County soldiers killed in World War I. The garden is surrounded by a wall made of rocks and fragments of tombstones so small they could not be included in the restoration.

Anyone who had seen the sad state of disrepair that the cemetery had fallen into would be amazed by how it looks today.

"I had an idea, but I didn't know how far it would lead me," Heckber said. "My great-great-grandmother gave me the inspiration and the Heckber family got the job done," he added.

The restoration has inspired Heckber to undertake restorations at other cemeteries in Jefferson Township, where Heckber serves as the township trustee.



The dedication service of the renovated Old Ossian Cemetery May 18 included Baird Hatfield on the bagpipes (left photo) and an address from State Representative Matt Lehman who wore a Civil War uniform for his address, highlighting Civil War veterans. (Photos provided)



"I became the trustee because I found out it was the trustee's job to not only mow the cemetery but to repair tombstones. I have three cemeteries in Jefferson Township. Old Ossian and Archbold cemeteries are now restored. Elhanan Cemetery has money budgeted for repairs this year and next," Heckber said.

He concluded, "There are a lot of cem-

eteries in Wells county that need repair, I hope other trustees will now know it is their job to repair the tombstones."

As for the future of the Old Ossian Cemetery, Dave Heckber summed it up as he looked out over the now beautiful quietude, "After all the hours we put in here, I hope someone will be willing to take care of it." ♦



The tombstone of Lanah Heckber, which inspired the Heckber Family to restore the Old Ossian Cemetery. The stone includes a new inscription which reads, "You called to us from beyond your resting place to preserve the memory of those buried here. They are not forgotten. May they be remembered and rest in God's tender care. The loving family of Lanah Broiller Musser Heckber. Until We Meet Again." (Photo by Glen Werling)

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Back home again in Indiana. Sometimes.

John and Pam Vanderkolk are back in Bluffton – when they're not traveling

By **DAVE SCHULTZ**

“World’s Largest Bowie Knife,” the sign said. So Pam Vanderkolk hit the brakes and turned into the driveway. “We gotta see this,” she said.

Her husband, John, was asleep at the time, but he woke up in a hurry.

Sure enough, in the appropriately named community of Bowie, Texas, the Vanderkolks took a look at the roadside attraction, all 20 feet of it.

On the same trip, they saw the World’s Largest Leg Lamp. It stands 40 feet tall in Chicasha, Okla.

Those sites illustrate the interests of the Vanderkolks, Bluffton residents and citizens of the world. They’re masters of the arcane, who are at a blessed point in their lives. If they find something interesting, they check it out. If it’s in the United States of America, or elsewhere in North America, Europe, Asia, and points beyond, they either have seen it or — depending what it is — they have plans to see it.

Pam served as the superintendent of the Bluffton Parks and Recreation Department for 22 1/2 years, resigning from that position in 2020. At that time, John was approaching age 65 and had served 41 years with the Indiana State Police, 15 years as a civilian and 26 years as a trooper.

“That 15 years was a magic number,” he says. “I knew I wanted to teach and be active in forensic science.”

He has created his own company, Unique Forensics LLC, and he travels here and there holding seminars on forensics comparative science. Fingerprints, shoe prints, shapes from broken and torn items — the stuff of crime scene investigations — John Vanderkolk tells police departments the world over what to look for and what those things could mean. The man’s eyes light up when he talks about it.

What prompted Pam’s resignation, and the couple’s temporary departure from Bluffton, was an opportunity provided to John by the federal government. A colleague with the ISP informed him that the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs was looking for someone with his skills.

“I looked at the application,” he recalled during a recent interview around

the couple’s dining room table. “I’m not a DNA expert. I don’t know Spanish. I don’t have a Ph.D., but I’ll apply for the job anyway.”

Eighteen months later, he received notice that it looked like he would get the job as a senior forensics adviser with the INL. “My job was to travel on missions to other countries that were seeking some kind of guidance or suggestions or technology improvements like their forensic science and CSI programs,” he said.

Pam was facing her own crossroads. Longtime Bluffton Mayor Ted Ellis was not running for re-election and a new mayor — who turned out to be John Whicker — would be making personnel decisions. There would be an all-new common council, and she was an at-will employee.

“When this opportunity became available for him, I said, ‘Let’s do it,’” Pam recalls.

John was surprised by the quickness of the reply. “You said that pretty quick,” he said.

“I just think I’m ready,” Pam said.

He had a one-year contract with the agency, renewable up to five years. The renewable aspect was important to them, as it turned out. Pam said she was willing to give it a try for two or three years. John said he was willing to stay for all five years, but he was fully intent on being there at least two.

That turned out to be prescient. John did not sign the third-year renewal because of a lack of activity. During his two years with the INL, he went on one visit — to the nation of Georgia, late in 2022. He didn’t feel that he was contributing anything.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly played a factor in that, and it certainly put a damper on their experience in the nation’s capital. The Vanderkolks rented an apartment in Arlington, Virginia, a stone’s throw from the Pentagon.

“We got there and we moved in on Thursday,” Pam said. “I shopped for stuff we needed for the apartment. My goal was that on Monday, I was going to go to the Smithsonian and enjoy.”

Not so fast. “Guess what shut down on Monday?” she asked rhetorically.

“D.C. shut down the week we arrived,” John said.

The Vanderkolks kept their house in Bluffton and they’re happily living there again.

— — —

The couple has roots in northwest Indiana. John joined the Indiana State Police in 1979 and served in Starke and Pulaski



John and Pam Vanderkolk are shown at their home in Bluffton. (Photo by Dave Schultz)

counties. While in Pulaski County, he happened to meet a dispatcher there. “I was the lady telling him where to go,” Pam says with a laugh.

She took a job at the Lafayette State Police post and the state trooper married the self-described “hillbilly girl from Starke County.” John became a crime scene investigator at the Fort Wayne ISP post and the couple moved to Bluffton.

It was a recommendation from Bob Plummer, who went to the ISP academy with John, that brought them to the Parlor City. When Plummer — who went on to be Bluffton’s fire chief and director of public safety — heard John was taking the CSI position in Fort Wayne, he highly recommended Bluffton as a place to live.

“I knew Bob Plummer and that was about it when I moved to Bluffton,” John said.

For Pam, the challenge of the new city was not as daunting. “I’ve never been a shy person,” she said. “No, no,” John said.

Both agree that if they had known each other in high school, they never would have spoken to each other, much less dated or — “God forbid” — get married. Now, 40 years after becoming a couple, they’re redefining their relationship in ways big and small.

Take meals, for instance. “The hardest thing for me was changing the way I cooked,” Pam said. When they moved to Arlington, there was only the two of them,

“rather than an army,” she said. They have seven children, and four of them live in Bluffton. They have five grandchildren with one more due in November. During much of their marriage, there wasn’t much of what Pam refers to as “us” time. “We’re getting reacquainted,” Pam says. “We’re becoming a couple again.”

— — —

One of the more delightful aspects of their renewed couplehood is wanderlust. There are places to go and things to see.

“People ask us why we don’t fly,” Pam says. Her reason is simple, and is illustrated by a recent in-the-news story: “I’m not interested in having an airplane door fly off in mid-flight.”

So when John gets a teaching gig through Unique Forensics, he tells Pam and she does the travel logistics, planning the route their 2019 Ford Escape will take.

“When he books a speaking engagement, he gives me the pathway that we’re taking to the location and I do the detail work — the hotels and the activities,” Pam says. “We always go early and meander — and then we meander a different path and see things on our way home.”

“We take a vacation going there,” John says.

That’s why they saw the giant Bowie knife and the 40-foot-tall leg lamp. They are particularly intrigued by the Muffler Men, the nationwide advertising icons.

“I saw a YouTube video of roadside



Traveling and selfies —the two go hand in hand: Pam and John Vanderkolk of Bluffton performed the necessary touristy thing at (from left) in front of the Georgian National Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi, on the banks of the Danube in Europe and at Death Valley in California. (Photos provided)

oddities,” Pam says. She keeps a three-ring binder where she types up a summary of what they’ve seen along the way.

The Vanderkolks regularly post their travels on Facebook for friends and family to see.

At the risk of sounding like Johnny Cash in his classic song “I’ve Been Everywhere,” they list trips to Singapore, Slovakia, India, and Panama. John’s been to China three times and they’ve been invited to Santiago, Chile.

Most of their trips are more mundane. Pam tries to recall a particular landmark, but she couldn’t remember if it was in Springfield, Illinois, or Kansas, or Missouri. She never recalled the landmark, but it’s not all that important. It was out there, they’ve seen it, and they enjoyed it. That’s true of so many things.

With all the travel — John had 12 seminars last year “without even trying,” he said — it’s significant that when John ended their D.C. sojourn, they returned to Bluffton, the community that has been their home since 1983.

When asked why, the duo are expansive.

“I think it’s the sense of community,” Pam said. “It’s been a great place to raise our family. Our kids are invested here.”

She also likes the way the community

is like a large family.

“The one thing — and I know this is going to sound crazy — but you know how when somebody’s ill or in a bad spot and you see the signs, ‘Pray for someone?’” she said. “I find that very comforting that if there’s a need, people come together.” And, she says, “People still pull over for funerals.”

Her husband agrees. After living in the Washington metropolitan area, “It seems like the bigger the community, the less people you know,” he says.

While some of their travel is dictated by John’s schedule not all of it is. Sometimes is a mixture. For instance, he wedged a seminar for the Honolulu Police Department into an extended visit to the Aloha State, telling his wife she could go to the beach or something that day. And there’s a specific trip coming up ...

“I have a specific place I want to go and I’m setting up a workshop to help me get there,” he says. The two-day seminar is at Glenwood Springs, Colo., a community west of Denver, about 19 hours driving time. The seminar is set for Sept. 11 and 12. When it’s done, they’ll continue their treks westward, another 13 hours away. Why?

The Indiana Hoosiers football team will play UCLA Saturday, Sept. 14, in

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Gideon Gerber led Wells County into the 20th Century

By ALAN DAUGHERTY

Many locals remember the current Flagstar Bank building at Main and Market in Bluffton as previously being Farmers and Merchants Bank, long led by a man who would eventually have a bridge crossing the Wabash River named after him. Fewer remember it not being Amos Gerber bringing the bank to town, but his father Gideon Gerber. The story of Gideon's accomplishments have been nearly lost to all but local historians.

Gideon wrote an autobiography. Wells County Public Library holds a copy. Amos published it after Gideon's death. Gerber forefathers left Switzerland in an ox-cart in 1850 when Adams and Wells counties remained largely wilderness. Scatterings of buildings consisted of log cabins and structures like John Studabaker's trading post. The journey crossed 4,000 miles. The new Gerber home five miles east of Bluffton existed in what the Swiss called "Baerenschwamm," meaning bear swamp. A round-trip to Newville (Vera Cruz) three miles distant took a full day by ox-cart.

Gideon, son of Ulrich and Kathleen, born in 1873, became the middle child of nine. Gideon achieved only to the level of fourth reader at the one-room Gerber School located sixty rods from home. The family had no buggy, causing them to walk two miles to the Apostolic Christian Church each Sunday. Gideon married Caroline on Christmas Day 1895, paying room and board while living with his parents for three years.

Gideon's father gave him the financial start he needed in January 1900 by selling him 79 acres in Harrison Township for \$2,000. It included a log cabin and lumber previously cut for a barn. His brothers helped build the barn.

In 1904, Gideon operated a gravel pit near Vera Cruz. He carried a goose-egg-size golden nugget for identification to Charles C. Deam. Deam declared it iron pyrite, fools' gold, but "the finest imitation of gold bearing ore that Wells County has produced in a long time."

Gideon farmed, cleared land, and managed Craigville's Burk Elevator when his second son, Amos, was born in 1911. This elevator stood in Craigville's town limits adjacent north of the railroad tracks, west of Main Street, today only an expanse of grass. During the six years Gideon managed the elevator he also started a side business selling coal, lime, cement, and fence posts in Craigville. Burk taught Gideon, "be careful what you promise... but what you do promise, keep your promise even if it takes the coat off your back." Local farmers bought stock and purchased the elevator from Burk as well as Gerber's side business of coal and lime. The new Craigville Elevator Company voted Gerber as both director and manager. Gideon and wife managed to take a vacation in August 1912 to the Pacific Coast, accompanied by John Minger and spouse.

In the spring of 1916 two bank promoters approached Gideon. It resulted in Gerber being elected one of seven directors and the bank's cashier. Gideon also continued with management of the elevator. Farmers State Bank of Craigville opened February 2, 1917, in a newly built two-story, two-business-room, brick bank building on the corner of Craigville's Main and Market. Today it holds the Craigville Post Office.

Nine of 45 original stockholders were Gerber siblings. They controlled a third of the capital under Gideon's guidance. Not all, but most, of the remaining stock had been purchased by Gerber's fellow church

members. Gideon had gained the trust of the neighborhood. Many of the work positions in the bank went to Gideon's children and in-laws, including Amos who began at the age of 16. Gideon made it a practice to purchase any shares becoming available. Son Amos followed this practice of controlling investing years later.

Gideon soon purchased what had been the Hower Hotel in Craigville to convert into the Gerbers' nine-room home complete with Delco lights. While serving the Craigville community, Gideon kept the depositors satisfied regarding the bank's integrity and solvency. The banks in Craigville and Ossian would be the only two in Wells County to survive the Depression years' banking chaos.

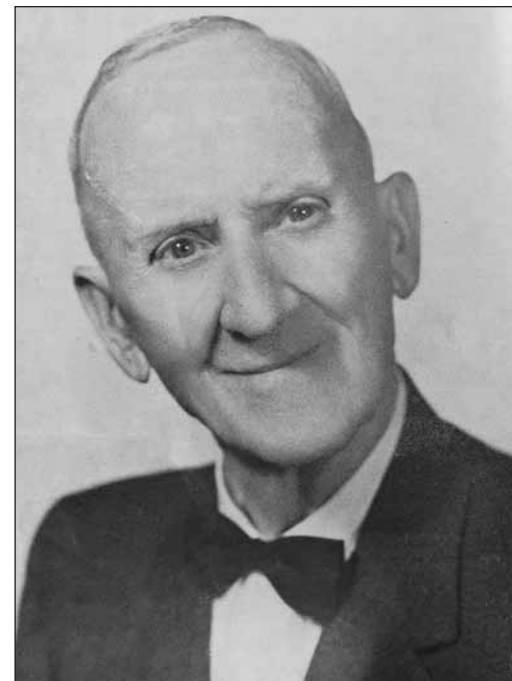
By the time Gideon suggested moving the bank to Bluffton, he had purchased controlling interest, buying stocks from others needing cash during those lean years.

Disaster first struck banking in Bluffton in 1927 when the president of the

Studabaker Bank committed suicide due to that bank's failure. The 1929 bank failures of the other two Bluffton banks opened an opportunity for Gideon's Farmers State Bank of Craigville. In January 1933 Gideon moved furnishings and staff to a different Main and Market corner — Bluffton's former Wells County Bank building. Gideon orchestrated a new charter of the bank and renamed it Farmers & Merchants Bank.

In August 1933, Gideon's son Amos and the Gerber family yet living in Craigville, reportedly lead a posse of six Craigville men hiding along the Clover Leaf Railroad track in town to catch a repeating coal thief. At 3 a.m. on the fourth night of lookout duty, "shotgun

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Despite having only a fourth-grade education, Gideon Gerber became a successful businessman and highly respected community leader.



These two artifacts from Craigville's early history are part of the collections at the Wells County Historical Museum.



This building in Craigville housed the Farmers State Bank when it moved to Bluffton and became the Farmers & Merchants Bank in 1933. Today it houses the Craigville Post Office in addition to some storage space and second floor apartments.

(Photos provided by Alan Daugherty)

Feeling blessed, 40 years after mowing his first lawn

By MARK MILLER

Steve and Gayla Gerber “never really had a plan,” they admit. What started out of their home 37 years ago is now housed in a building with about a half-acre under roof next to a 30,000-sq.-ft nursery. It all started, however, 40 years ago when Steve began mowing the local Hardees’ lot.

He had been working with his father and brothers at Gerber Lawn Service. He describes the decision of going out on his own in 1987 as “unsure, scary (and) exciting.” But, he and Gayla quickly add, “we’ve been blessed.”

Steve’s Landscape Maintenance purchased Tim’s Small Engine in 1990 and moved into their first commercial building on the northeast corner of Scott and Perry streets. Just one year later, they moved to what had been the Swisher Lumber Co. location on West Wabash Street. Business was good; just five years later, more space was needed. They purchased a building and seven acres on East S.R. 124 in 1996, and thought this would be their permanent location. But things change.

An unexpected offer, at first turned down, to purchase that building was soon followed by an opportunity to purchase the much larger (and current) property on North Main Street. It was after the offer was accepted and plans put in place that the financial crunch of 2008 happened, but even that turned out to be “a blessing in disguise,” Steve says. Contractors, desperate for work, gave the couple multiple bids on all of the construction work.

It was during this most recent move the decision was made to change the name to Outdoor Concepts, looking towards the family’s upcoming generation.

Today, the company employs more than 70 people and has added another location in Muncie after a Grasshopper lawn mower dealer closed.

Starting out with just lawn mainte-



Above left: Steve and Gayla Gerber in front of their landscaping and lawn care business. It was 40 years ago that Steve mowed his first lawn as a job. Today, the couple employs more than 70 people and also operate a store in Muncie in addition to the own on North Main Street in Bluffton. (Photo by Mark Miller)



nance services, “we just had a dream of a lawn and garden center with services.” Steve continues. He describes the growth as “organic” and how new employees brought different talents. “It has just moved our company in ways we didn’t ever dream or think of.”

The couple’s Christian faith has played an important role in their business, which

they see as a ministry. In addition to influencing how they treat both their employees and customers, their faith has led them to support local non-profits financially and organizing company-wide community service projects. The Gerbers have, for example, been the main sponsors of the annual January gospel music event that benefits a local non-profit.

“We believe we are where we’re at because of God’s blessings in our life and on our business. So naturally we want to give back and help out those in need,” the Gerbers say.

“We always have the philosophy of like Jesus said... ‘treat others the way you want to be treated’ and ‘love and care about others the way Jesus would.’” ♦



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Dedication, training, lead to a state run

Tyler Godwin did what no other Bluffton cross-country runner has done since 2000: make an appearance at the state meet.

The senior had a dominant performance at the Allen County Athletic Conference meet, winning by 30 seconds in front of second-place and teammate Levi Johns. He was the only runner to reach below the 17-minute mark, a rate that has only been beaten by 10 runners in school history (unofficially). He did that last season while also being awarded honorable mention by the Indiana Association of Track and Cross Country Coaches.

Godwin's career began in middle school, running competitively in sixth grade with the inspiration from his mother, a former state competitor of her own in Georgia.

He never really thought of how good he might be until his freshmen year of track, winning the ACAC 3200 meter race. Since then, he has had a belief in himself to do more and train with more intensity and consistency.

"I was doing what we were told to do, but I wasn't training that hard per se," Godwin said after the conference meet. "And I went, and I won conference in the 3200, and I wasn't really supposed to win that race. That was kind of where I was like, Dad, I could be pretty decent at this."

Godwin said that last year's sectional meet in cross country was one of the most "disappointing races" in his running career. He placed fifth with a time of 17:06.4. He carried that feeling into the regional race the following week and shaved off 12 seconds.

That strive to improve not only translated to immediate results but into motivation heading into the offseason, where he found the perfect workout partner.

During the summer, Godwin lives with his father in Florida. He packed his bags and wanted to get right to work.

He asked his head coach, Michael Vanderkolk if he could research some of the area high schools to see if he could work out with their team. What they found was a nearby high school called Wakulla in Crawfordville, just south of Tallahassee.

Vanderkolk contacted the cross country coach, Michael Martin, and explained the situation. Martin agreed, and even said that his best runner, junior Henry Lewis would benefit from having Godwin train with him.

Lewis hovered in the 16:48 time range, the best by far on the team, and

couldn't challenge himself. Godwin sat just below that time slot, and the two immediately benefited.

The two compared in time, but each had different strengths. Lewis was good with endurance, while Godwin was better with speed. Throughout the summer, both would teach each other drills to improve their weaknesses.

The two improved vastly together. At the time, Godwin didn't see the results, but a lot had changed when he returned home.

"I didn't notice as much in the summer, but I really started to tell how all the training helped whenever we started doing practices (in Bluffton), and we were doing tempo runs," Godwin said. "I spent a day and would look back at my runs from the previous year. But at the end of the year, for typical runs, the mile paces are like 20 or 25 seconds faster."

At the ACAC meet, he ran a 16:43.60, 13 seconds faster than the semi-state race.

The efforts as an individual trickled down to the team for the Tigers with a newfound leader with Godwin.

Bluffton had success of its own last year, winning the ACAC, sectional champions for the first time in 24 years, and an appearance at the semi-state race.

Godwin became a leader for everyone on the team, especially the younger ones.

Vanderkolk and Godwin shared that he texted his teammates after the second race this season, encouraging them to find a routine before each meet to simplify the big day.

For example, Godwin said that he eats a carb-heavy meal the night before, as endurance-type athletes typically do. On race day, he randomly scrolls through a chapter of his Bible and reads scripture while listening to the same playlist. To warm up, he does four strides. On the second one, he goes alone to thank God for giving him the opportunity to run that day.

Before the season began, Godwin and Vanderkolk came to an agreement to run with more intent during practices to reach a higher level. Before, Vanderkolk said that the last few weeks of practice didn't have goals other than to advance to the next round.

"Tyler said, 'I don't want it to be like this next year. I want to be more aggressive with our training, staying on top of it.' It's like, Yeah, I'm for that as well," Vanderkolk said.

Godwin took second place at sectional with a time of 16:28.80; the team also placed second to advance to region-



Tyler Godwin (left) races alongside teammates Jude Baumgartner (middle) and Levi Johns (right) during Bluffton's inaugural cross country Invitational on Saturday, Oct. 2. The three placed 1-3 that day, leading Bluffton to a team win. (Photo by Jessica Bricker)

al competition. With the semi-state level removed from the schedule by the IHSAA, he would need to have a strong showing at regional.

He punched his ticket to Terre Haute with a strong time of 16:19.8, placing 21st. The senior finished in 168th place at state out of 250 runners with a time of 16:36.8 (5:20.8 per mile).

Godwin finished his career with two ACAC individual titles, two ACAC team titles, a team sectional champ, a semi-

state appearance, and led Bluffton to some of its best seasons in school history.

"Very few runners in Bluffton in history have made it to state, and it's elite company that he is officially a part of," Vanderkolk said. "And that's just a testament to the work that he's put in on his own. The growth he's made as a person, as a teammate, as a leader, and it's just all really benefiting as a runner and a young man." ♦

Original reporting by Ryan Walker

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The easy life for K-9 Leo

After eight years of service to the Wells County Sheriff's Department, recently retired K-9 Leo is settling into a life without work. At least — that's the goal.

By SYDNEY KENT

The man at the other end of Leo's leash, his handler-turned-owner Sergeant A.J. Campbell, said Leo is still "ready to go." That is — when Campbell is home. His wife, Tessa, has a different experience with the beloved animal.

"With my wife, he's a totally different dog," Campbell laughed. "But with me, he's always working. He hasn't settled down just yet. A regular dog at 10 years old, might sleep for 10 hours a day. If I'm awake, he's awake. He's on the go and back and forth — always doing stuff."

Leo finished his final call with the department on April 26. Dispatch concluded with the following message: "You have touched the hearts of your coworkers and the citizens of Wells County. Enjoy retirement with family, and get your well-deserved rest — you've earned it. Congratulations, and happy 10th birthday, K-9 Leo. Your presence will be greatly missed. K-9 Leo's final 1042 at 07:07."



Leo's final call on April 26 with handler Sergeant A.J. Campbell. Today, Leo is living the best dog life as he searches for food and lounges around the house — when dad isn't home, of course. (N-B file photo; home photo provided)

As a work dog, specific boundaries were in place for Leo. Campbell explained that Leo formerly lived in a kennel outside of the house. This practice allowed Leo to constantly be prepared and accustomed to the elements — an important requirement for a 24/7 on-call police dog. After he retired last month, Campbell took a week off of work to help Leo acclimate to living inside the home.

"My wife says I struggle more than he does," Campbell said. "I get ready for work, he lays on the bed and doesn't get too excited. But anytime he gets to go into the garage and sit next to the car door, he is ready to go. He's well-behaved for a few minutes, then he wants to

find stuff. If he doesn't get the satisfaction, he will find his own stuff."

Campbell compared Leo's need for retirement to that of a professional athlete.

"We all slow down," Campbell explained. "He couldn't track someone for a mile and a half now, he gets tired. Most professional football players retire at an earlier age than maybe we would expect, the activities are hard on their bodies. A lot of police dogs have wear and tear even just from jumping in and out of the police vehicles. It's common to develop problems from that."

However, Leo's health is in great shape, and though

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Making new friends at 10,000 feet

By CHET BAUMGARTNER

On any given day, Hannah Gerber might look out her window at work and see cornfields — or the Atlantic Ocean.

Sometimes, she'll see the Washington Monument. Sometimes she'll see hundreds of lit windows speckling the otherwise dark streets of New York City.

She even saw the green, blue, and purple curtain of the Northern Lights, and she didn't even have to look up.

This past January, Gerber — a 24-year-old Wells County resident and 2018 Bluffton High School graduate — finished her first year as a flight attendant for American Airlines. Since her first day, Gerber has traveled about 50,000 miles, primarily along the east coast and as far north as Toronto and as far south as the Bahamas.

In between, she has reviewed emergency procedures hundreds of times; she has offered thousands of drinks and snacks. More importantly, though, she said she hopes she has blessed every passenger with a “ray of sunshine in the sky” and the love of Jesus.

“You just never know why people are flying, so you just have to show love and patience,” she said. “I’ve just learned to love God and love others just how Jesus does and try to be the best that you can.”

And often, that love starts with a bag of pretzels.

Once the plane reaches 10,000 feet, and Gerber hears the “ding,” she and the other flight attendants start their rounds of 10-minute compliance checks. They traverse the aisles to serve food, collect trash, and “make a new friend,” Gerber said.

“Flying can be stressful for a lot of people ... so I’m just here to make it light-hearted and to make it fun. That’s how I make connections, by having fun with them,” she explained.

“You can tell some people are lonely, so I will try to make interactions if I can ... Even if it’s just with a smile or extra snack, I’ll do what I can to be nice to them.”

Gerber said she’s not trying to force a conversation — she doesn’t disturb readers and early-morning flyers, for instance — but she looks for “common ground” ripe for connections.

“If I like their shoes, I’ll make a comment,” she said. “Shoes are a good way to start a conversation.”

She’s also bonded over a mutual love for tomato juice; she’s complimented passengers’ hair; she’s offered extra snacks, particularly to people who appear lonely;



Hannah Gerber, a Wells County resident, poses in her American Airlines’ flight attendant uniform. Gerber began working at the beginning of 2023. (Photo provided)

she’s offered window seats to first-time flyers and told them to take pictures of their trips for her; she’s given suckers to children, just like she did when she worked at the ProFed Credit Union in Bluffton.

And she’s cooed over many a mother’s baby. “If I can get a baby snuggle ... then it’s a good flight,” she said.

She said she particularly likes to ask passengers about their destinations and the reasons for their trips. And those reasons further help her better learn how to bless them, she said.

For instance, in March 2023, Gerber

saw a woman in a wheel chair — and in tears — board the plane. The pilot also noticed the woman’s agitation and questioned if she could fly, particularly when the woman wouldn’t talk to the crew.

Gerber volunteered to talk to the passenger, and she told Gerber that she had earlier miscarried and was now flying home after the surgery.

“I just gave her a big hug and told her that I was praying for her,” Gerber said.

Another time, Gerber served a passenger whose son had just died, and she’s also served passengers flying to funerals.

But she’s also served passengers too

excited for their trips.

Before one flight, for instance, a group of older men boarded the plane to begin their vacation and golfing trip, and to celebrate, “they had a little too much to drink” at the airport, Gerber said, and their increasingly loud and obnoxious comments began frustrating the other passengers.

Officially, no one can board a plane while intoxicated, but Gerber didn’t think she needed to escort them off yet. Instead, she approached one of the men — who was “just having himself a party” — and simply told him to behave, or he would need to disembark.

“He instantly started acting like a toddler,” she said. “He folded his hands and said, ‘I’ll be good, I’ll be good, I’ll be good.’” And with that promise, she gave him “a ton of snacks,” and he caused no more problems.

“Every day ... there’s somebody new I meet,” she said. “It’s a big, wide world.”

But for Gerber, that big, wide world starts at the Dayton International Airport, where her work “week” begins. And that week may begin Monday; it may start Thursday, and it may start Saturday.

It may start at 8 a.m., or 1 p.m., or 10 p.m.

As a relative rookie among her fellow flight attendants, Gerber said she can only request the reserve shifts, in which she fills in for senior flight attendants who couldn’t fly for some reason. Along with these shifts, American requires her to be on call about 20 days a month, and on those days, Gerber can’t travel farther than two hours from Dayton.

Once her week begins, each shift typically includes one to four legs, or flights. For instance, on one “four-leg” day, she left Birmingham, Ala., at 11 a.m. and flew to Charlotte, N.C. From there, she flew to Montreal, Canada, and then back to Charlotte. Finally, she and the plane landed in Toronto, Canada, at about 10:20 p.m.

“It can be exhausting, but it can be very rewarding,” she said.

She said she usually covers two legs in a day, which generally ensures enough time to rest and eat at her leisure, either because the final flight landed early in the evening or because of a lengthy “sit,” or the time she waits at an airport in between flights. But when she bids for shifts for the next month, she doesn’t know if she’ll cover two legs, three legs, or four legs.

“You just can’t predict the unpredictable,” she said.

And on those “exhausting” days with

A unique passenger. A unique memory.

Before a flight near the end of May, 12 men dressed in black boarded Hannah Gerber's plane.

After they settled in, a 77-year-old man followed and sat in the first row of first class.

Gerber didn't recognize him at first, but as the rest of the passengers boarded, many of them asked for his picture.

They also referred to him as "Mr. President."

And after finding his picture online to confirm her suspicions, Gerber realized that former president Bill Clinton was flying with them to White Planes, N.Y.

"He was so nice and smiley the whole flight," she said. "It was the most casual encounter with a former president I think to ever happen."

Gerber also referred to him as a "ham," but one who "loves people and doesn't mind flying commercial just like the rest of us."

And like many other passengers, Clinton apparently worried when the flight experienced turbulence during its final 20 minutes.

"All of a sudden we heard a big boom, and the whole plane flashed with the brightest light," Gerber said.

Shocked, Clinton asked Hannah about the incident, but she didn't know.

"That was the first time that had ever happened to me, so I was just as shocked and told him that I had no idea.

"And we both just laughed it off."

— Chet Baumgartner

multiple legs, Gerber will occasionally sleep in the cockpit during her "sits," she said.

However, on those days without long sits, she'll take 30-minute power naps

during her breaks in the air, she said. And when she can't sit and eat, she snacks when she can.

"I'm a like a raccoon eating over a trash can, trying to scarf it down," she said.

Of course, she said, she tries to procure first-class snacks (she particularly recommends the jerky), and she has learned to "love" Starbucks.

"I never was a coffee drinker before I became a flight attendant," she said. "Now I run on caffeine."

But this job has inspired more than a caffeine addiction. It has inspired confidence, she said. Whether enduring turbulence or unruly passengers, she's had to "woman up," she said, for "the good of everybody."

Even if she doesn't feel confident, she said she must smile and laugh because if she can't, her passengers won't.

Fortunately, when her plane flies through turbulent weather, she doesn't worry. First, she trusts the pilots, she said. Second, the pilots often warn the attendants ahead of time. But when they can't, she just "holds on to something" and enjoys the ride, she said.

"I've always been an adrenaline junkie. Passengers tell me I'm crazy. I've feel like I've got jet fuel in my blood. I feel so free up there," she said.

"I don't have to go to Cedar Point to get my rides."

"She definitely has a more adventurous spirit than me," said Gerber's mother, Jami, who does not enjoy flying, she said.

But turbulence didn't concern Gerbers' parents the most when their daughter started traveling 36,000 feet in the air at about 500 mph.

Chad Gerber confessed to "a little bit of apprehension and concern" knowing his daughter would be traveling "without dad going out to protect her."

And Jami Gerber said she also worried about the quality of the hotels where her daughter would stay.

(Continued on Page 38)

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A state champion and president, Isaac Stoller sets new goals

BY MARK MILLER

It is noteworthy that local auctioneer Isaac Stoller is currently serving as the president of the Indiana Auctioneers Association. One might be further intrigued to learn that he was the 2020 Indiana Auctioneer Champion. However, those two singular aspects of this energetic 40-ish real estate and auction professional is just the tip of the iceberg.

If one were to introduce him to a crowd, it would be difficult to know where to begin. We will begin with his love of auctions.

“We always went to Loy’s Sale Barn,” Stoller says. He grew up on a farm just across the Adams-Wells County line east of Vera Cruz. The sale barn was located just south of the Adams-Jay County line near the Ohio border. His father would be buying sheep or selling lambs.

“It was exciting. I just loved the cadence, the drama of the bidding.” His father also worked part time for the Ellenberger Bros. Auction firm, helping to set up and organize during the week, preparing for the weekend sales.

When his parents divorced and sold their farm, Stoller, then 12 years old, was fascinated by the process and how the auctioneers from Ellenbergers worked.

He openly discusses his “difficult childhood,” but his home-schooled situation also provided him with the flexibility to take a nearly full time job at a nearby swine farm when he was 15. The restrictions in his “Amish-Mennonite” home was also a blessing in that he essentially saved all of his earnings, so that when he graduated from home high school and turned 18 in 2006, he was able to buy a home rather than rent.

“My plan to escape home was to join the Air Force,” he says, but the onset of Type-1 diabetes nixed that. He continued to work at the pig farm and did construction work on the side while he struggled with what he wanted to do with his life.

His path was first determined by a chance meeting in October 2006 with Tim Kruse of Auburn; the two had met while playing against each other on home-



Isaac Stoller accepts the ceremonial gavel from outgoing Indiana Auctioneers Association president Marc Huber of Greenfield at the group’s annual meeting this past November. Stoller’s term lasts through November of this year.

school basketball teams. His friend had begun working in the family business of Reppert’s School of Auctioneering; Kruse subsequently sent Stoller a brochure, who immediately signed up for the next class that began in November. After graduating in March 2007, Stoller began working at Saturday auctions with the same Ellenberger firm and auctioneers who had sold his family’s farm just a few years prior.

He mentions a number of mentors — Pat Carter, Rudy Frauhofer, Bob Ellenberger and Jody Holloway, who advised Stoller to get his real estate license which he soon did. He graduated from the Troyers Real Estate school in 2008.

Meanwhile, “I had to get some insurance and make my mortgage payments,” he says, so

he took a job at Pretzels, Inc. at age 19. His trajectory there in his six years at the local factory is also noteworthy. After two years on the production floor he was promoted to a supervisor and then two years later as a manager.



The Stoller family includes wife Megan and five-year-old Niles.

“I learned a lot” during this time, he says, “but I knew this wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.” He continued to help at auctions as he could, but his growing responsibilities at Pretzels often interfered with that.

A second chance meeting of an earlier acquaintance changed things further. Sometime around 2009, he had met Megan Terhune. Stoller had begun riding a motorcycle and was part of a social group of fellow enthusiasts; she was dating another of that group. About four years later, their paths happened to cross again. She was no longer dating that guy but would be interested in taking a motorcycle ride. They were married in 2014.

It was Megan who encouraged him to chase his dream.

“She asked me what I really wanted to do,” he says, and then supported his decision to leave the security of a regular paycheck. He tackled the effort with what he describes as “a passion.”

“This business is all about relationships,” he says. So he joined both the state and national auctioneer associations, attended conventions and learned from the sessions and the networking. With Jody Holloway’s involvement in the Realtors’ groups, he became involved in that side of the relationships as well and was soon recruited to serve on the organizations’ boards.

When he became aware of the state’s annual competition among auctioneers, he immediately wanted to give it a try. He competed in his first state competition in 2015 “and came in dead last,” he says. Undeterred, he took the judges’ comments and criticisms “and I worked and practiced.”

The competition involves the basics of the auctioneer’s delivery, after which the field is narrowed to five finalists, who then go through an interview with the judges. “It’s kind of like a ‘Miss America’ question-and-answer,” he says. That is followed by another impromptu auction assignment.

He entered again in 2016 and ’17 and continued to hone his skills. In 2018 and ’19 he was a finalist but did not place in the top three. In the 2020 competition, he again made the finals and was “shocked” to hear his name called out as the champion.

“There was another fellow who I was sure was going to win, but it turns out I did really well in the interview portion,”



Isaac Stoller retains his auction talents and gets his “live auction fix” by working at charity auctions such as this one in October 2023. This was for the Humane Society of Fort Wayne and was held at the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum. (Photos provided)

Stoller says. “That’s what made the difference.”

Past champions are barred from further competition but finding this as a challenge and a boost to his confidence and auctioneering abilities, he has moved up to regional and now international competitions, finishing 22nd in last year’s event held in Oklahoma City. The approximately 70 fellow competitors included auctioneers from Africa, Canada and Mexico. He will compete again this July in Pittsburgh.

Among his auction competition awards, Stoller also proudly mentions his selection as “Best Local Auctioneer” in the News-Banner’s annual Readers’ Choice Awards for the past four years.

Auctions being only part of his career,

Stoller has also made a mark in the area's real estate field. He was named the 2019 Realtor of the Year for the Up State Alliance of Realtors (UPSTAR), whose 1,700 members serve the seven counties in Northeast Indiana. In 2023, Stoller was the 38th-most productive in terms of real estate sales among those 1,700 and was recently featured on the cover of "Real Producers," the area trade magazine for real estate.

He is currently the chair of the government affairs committee and also serves on the community outreach committee and RPAC Trustees of UPSTAR, which is the group's national political action committee. He graduated from the Indiana Realtors Leadership Academy in 2019 and completed requirements to receive his Certified Auctioneers Institute designation from the National Auction Association in 2023.

"This is considered by the NAA as kind of a masters degree," he explains. The classes required three years of study, some of which was held on the Indiana University campus.

Meanwhile, his position on the Indiana Auctioneers Association board led to an election to serve in the officer positions. His current term as president lasts through November.

"It's been a bit more than I thought it would be," he says, referring to his duties as leader of the state organization.

He has found himself as the contact person for disputes and complaints from the public regarding auctioneers. There are procedures established by Indiana Code to address these that involve a volunteer board and a state agency. "We're working on a number of issues," he says.

Besides a goal of winning the international auction competition, Stoller is working toward gaining certification as a "BAS — Benefit Auction Specialist," he says. This goal circles back to his original motivation to be in this business because "I just love live auctions."

The pandemic in 2020 changed many things, including the virtual disappear-

ance of live personal property auctions. While real estate auctions are still done in person, the business of online auctions of personal property has exploded.

Now associated with the Steffen Group, "We only do online auctions for personal property," he explains. The traditional in-person auctions might attract 100 bidders, "maybe as many as 150 if there are some truly unique items to sell," he says. Online auctions will typically attract 600 bidders with about 15,000 people who will view the items. The new process benefits both the sellers and the auctioneers, a "win-win."

"I no longer spend my Saturdays working at an auction," Stoller says.

While he shares that watching the bidding, particularly as it finishes up on a Sunday afternoon, "is more exciting than watching football," he misses the drama and excitement of in-person auctions. He has been filling that void by getting involved in charity auctions.

Locally, he has "gladly" volunteered his services for local charities such as Loving Shepherd Ministries, Forgotten Children Worldwide, the Boys and Girls Club, Friends Who Care and 4-H. However, high-end charity auctions hire auctioneers. He got his foot in the door of this niche through another relationship he'd built in the state association — a friend had more offers and opportunities than he wanted.

For example, he provided his state-championship skills June 1 at an auction to benefit "Purses for a Purpose" in Indianapolis. He estimates he does about a dozen major charity auctions for a fee in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and Lafayette each year now, mostly in the fall.

"Is getting this certification a step towards maybe this becoming a full-time gig?" he is asked.

He demurs a bit. He's not sure. He enjoys helping people buy and sell their homes as a Realtor and the online auctions are fun.

"But I really love live auctions," he says. ♦



After winning the state championship competition in 2020, Stoller can no longer compete on the state level but has moved on to international competition.

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Peace Corps stint changed Mark Weinert's life

By BOB CAYLOR

Mark Weinert's affable, attentive teaching style has touched the lives of thousands of Norwell High School students since he began teaching 37 years ago. Looking back on his career, he says he wouldn't be the same teacher or even the same person he is today without the time he spent working in Africa, with the Peace Corps and the United Nations' World Food Program.

He joined the Peace Corps immediately after his graduation from Purdue University, with a bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry. He says a mixture of altruistic and selfish motivations moved him to do that. The altruistic motivation of helping people in a developing nation is evident. Selfish? That part demands some explaining.

"I wanted to travel. I wanted to learn another language," he said. "I was poor as a church mouse. And I wanted to have an interlude before I started my career."

He'd studied some Spanish, so he said he'd prefer to be posted among an English-speaking or Spanish-speaking population. But the Peace Corps, like the military, doesn't make new recruits' preferences its guiding principle. He learned he would go to Benin, on the West African coast, to teach. That also meant learning French, because Benin had been a French colony for nearly a century. He spent about three months in immersion language training to equip himself to teach French-speaking students.

Weinert says that working in Africa built emotional resilience in him, a process that he compares to the way that playing sports in high school developed his physical resilience. That character-building began as soon as the Peace Corps dropped him off in Tanguietta, the town of about 3,000 people where he would teach. The bus left him and his few bags there at midnight. The town had no electricity, so of course no streetlights, either. He saw no one about town. And he had no instructions about what to do next. He sat with his bags until dawn, when people started moving around, and persuaded someone to take him to see a local leader.

"It was a little tough at first," Weinert said. When he began teaching, his French was still rough, so he'd stay up until 1 or 2 a.m. planning and writing his presentation for the following day in class. He used a kerosene lantern and crafted a metal reflector to illuminate his hut enough for him to prepare class notes.

"Then I had a problem. I didn't get paid for two months. I was literally borrowing food. I was hungry. It was the first time in my life I was physically hungry," Weinert said.

He was moved by the concern that villagers showed for him, particularly during those very lean couple of months.

"People were always coming by. Sometimes people would just sit with me. I found out they didn't want me to be alone. Americans value solitude; they do not value solitude," he said. "It was very stressful in the first couple of months, until I started getting paid and started understanding some of the cross-cultural differences," Weinert said.

"On top of that, I got very sick for a while, with malaria and dysentery," he said. "I'd probably be dead if it weren't for a little girl in my compound. I hadn't come out for a day and a half, so she came into my hut and found me. It turns out that I had cerebral malaria and



Norwell chemistry teacher Mark Weinert explains an experiment to students in the lab during the week before finals in May. (Photo by Bob Caylor)

amoebic dysentery."

His susceptibility to illness in fact steered him onto the path leading to Norwell High School.

"I had planned on making a career in Africa with (non-governmental organizations), but I had chronic malaria, and I knew I wouldn't last long if I stayed there," he said.

"I can't imagine the man I would be if I hadn't gone," Weinert said. "It really opened my mind to a world-view. I think I'm more understanding of culture and cultural differences."

His time in Africa provided him with time and an exceptional setting in which to reflect on life and people. His insights still flavor his teaching, as broad themes and small asides.

During a canned-food drive at Norwell, he might tell students, "You should strive to live simply so that others can simply live."

"They kind of look at me funny, then I explain what I mean."

"I tell students this time, from your late teens to your mid-20s, is a time when you have to be responsibly selfish. What I mean by that is that you have to look to yourself and set yourself up for your future. There are three things you have to get right, or if you get them right, your life will be more content. The first thing is you have to think about your spiritual, inner life. The second is the person you find that you want to spend your life with, your life partner. The third thing is your choice of career or what you want to do with your life," he said.



Mark Weinert is surrounded by children in Djougou, Benin, in 1985. He had just started working for the United Nations' World Food Program. (Photo provided)



Mark Weinert was honored as one of three 2024 Educators of the Year by the Wells County Chamber of Commerce. Part of his family was able to attend the announcement in December — at left is his daughter Erica Pearson along with four of his grandchildren: Dominic, Jayla, C.J. and Lani. He and his wife of 40 years, Salamatou, also have another daughter, Sydney, who lives in Sacramento, Calif., with her husband Josh and daughter Zayda. (News-Banner file photo)

Those were all deep questions Weinert attended to in Africa — even the question of choosing a spouse. He met his wife, Salamatou, in Benin.

He finds that those central questions in life — and his prods to consider them — resonate with young people here as much now as ever.

“Years later, I’ve had students come back here. They never want to talk about

chemistry; they want to talk about life lessons or some of the conversations we’ve had,” he concluded.

“Honestly, what is our job here? Yes, it’s to prepare them with content to go on to the next level, but it’s to help them to transition from childhood to adulthood during a very difficult time in life,” he said. “It’s been a great ride. I’ve really enjoyed my career.” ♦

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Markle park built on community's love.



By **JONATHAN SNYDER**

Markle has three parks that its Parks Department has jurisdiction over, Old Mill Park, Veterans Park and Walking Park. Its most notable park, however, is a non-profit, privately owned endeavor. It's been that way for close to 75 years.

The Markle Fish and Game Club park was founded in 1950.

"I think the key though, is understanding that throughout the history (of the park), we've never taken a tax dollar in our lives to keep this place going," Markle Fish and Game Club board president Trent Winkler said. "So that's kind of the amazing thing about it. It's all the local people who have given their time and money to keep the park going."

The first goal of the park was to construct a lighted softball diamond, which was in all the neighborhoods surrounding Markle at the time. The cost of purchasing the land, along with planning and construction of the diamond would need a minimum of \$8,500 in community-raised funds to cover the expenses, about \$110,000 in today's money when adjusting for inflation. The community raised \$10,600.

Soon afterward, children's playgrounds, the swimming hole, picnic areas and a Boy Scout cabin designated for Troop 128 were built on the property, which still stands. The loving and skilled hands from volunteers are the primary source of park maintenance and general repair work.

The Markle community continues to be fiercely loyal to ensuring the park's success. In 1959, the park was almost cut in half because of flood control construction cutting through. A historical document presented by Winkler and Greg Wilson, who volunteers frequently at the park, states that the Army Corps of Engineers put surveyor-grade stakes in the softball diamond near second base and did not inform the park of their intentions.

The park members then went to the town board chairman at the time, Wade Randol, who uncovered a blueprint of the engineers' intentions: they planned to construct a levee through the park to help prevent the Wabash River from overflowing in the area. Seeing no way to resolve this in court, the members went to Congressman Ed Roush of Huntington to ask for help in

finding a solution.

Roush used his influence to set up a meeting between the chief engineer, park members, members of the local Boy Scout troop and other members of the community so Markle could show their desire to keep the park intact. While the engineers could not promise any change, they were impressed by the outpouring of support for the park.

Critically, the engineers had not spent the money appropriated for the engineering process, which meant that no construction engineering, test boring or a final draft of the project had occurred. After two years of waiting, Senator Vance Hartke came back to the park with great news — the park had been saved. The future 1964 flood control measures would not disturb the park.

— — —

With no tax dollars injected into the park, it falls on community generosity to improve the park, which has come through time and again. Recently, the park has added an 18-hole disc golf course, and has kept up with resurfacing the basketball courts, along with baseball and softball diamond upkeep.



Greg Wilson volunteers by trimming branches to keep the park clean. (Photo by Jonathan Snyder)

"We do things pretty conservatively around here just because we know it's not an infinite, deep pool that we have to dip from." Winkler said. "So we really watch what we spend money on and usually if something breaks, whether that's electrical, plumbing, whatever it may be, one volunteer or another around the community steps up and tries to fix it if we can. It's rare for us to hire an outside company that have things fixed."

Volunteers use their special talents and expertise to keep the park running as best they are able. Winkler himself once used his experience in a heating and air cooling company to help fix electrical and plumbing issues that the park had.

"I think that's probably why a lot of the people join the park board," Winkler said. "They just either have a talent that they can share, or they just want to try and help out. And so that's just kind of what keeps it going. It's just all volunteers."

Fundraisers usually see lots of success, whether they be for the park or not. "Ride to Provide" is a yearly fundraiser hosted by the park to help a local family in need with medical bills, or other things that the family has to have. Winkler stated that the program usually raises upwards of \$30,000 in one day that goes to the designated family.

While the town government has no say in improvements, spending or who's on the Fish and Game Club's board, they still pitch in to help from time to time. Council member Nicolas Lund once found a matching grant opportunity through the Indiana Housing Coalition Development and Authority, which stated that private donations to the fund could be matched.

The park, as a not-for-profit organization, applied for the grant and it led to over \$100,000 — \$50,000 of which coming from the matching grant — being injected into the park from the community and through discretionary funds budgeted out by the town of Markle.

"And we (as a community) raised \$50,000 and it matched," Lund said. "They (the community) actually raised \$7,000 more than that so it paid for the fees of the grant and the website. So they raised close to \$104,000 to do a project down there that they wanted to do for 15 to 20 years, and we did it in about two and a half months. It was a no-brainer."

DeAngelo, Kenisha and Natalia Cope-land enjoy a swim in the "Markle pool," which is really a reclaimed gravel pit. (Photo by Jonathan Snyder)



It seems like everyone involved in keeping the park alive has a fond love for it that dates back to their youth. Wilson met his wife while he was in high school enjoying a day at the park. Council member Matthew Doss as well as Lund both recalled memories of cooling swims throughout their childhood.

The park has become a key pillar of Markle's community, so much so that people from Fort Wayne and even from out of state have come to enjoy the beauty the park provides. From the community support, to the surprisingly wide reach the park has, Markle Fish and Game Club has become a keystone to life in the town.

"I think it's just being part of a small community that keeps supporting itself," Winkler said. "And we use this as the city park. Because we would not have survived this long without the community and volunteers and everything else. You just simply can't. So yeah, it is hard to wrap your head around."

"Without this Markle is like every other stop in northeastern Indiana," Wilson said.

"The success of the last 75 years was what got us to today," Lund said. "But I think there's a renewed focus of making sure that the next 75 years are just as good if not better than the last ones." ♦

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Knight Moves
co-ed show choir.

Headed in a new direction

Norwell show choirs embrace change with new director

By **HOLLY GASKILL**

Taking leadership of the Norwell High School show choir program was an initially intimidating task for first-year teacher Tyler Doyle.

Now two years into the gig, the groups have encountered new success and camaradery under their new director.

In 2021, Doyle took over the legacy choir from teacher Carla Doles, who had taught choir 18 years at NHS and 45 years total. Any significant change affects a program, but even more so on the tail of two show-choir years disrupted by COVID-19.

At the time, Doyle had just graduated from Purdue Fort Wayne with his long-time dream to lead a show choir.

“I was that kid that got hooked (in high school) right away,” he laughed. “If we ever had time off, I would be the one that would be going to like a Fort Wayne competition and just sitting there and watching.”

Doyle even met his wife, Brittany, through show choir, and she now helps with the Norwell groups.

“The idea of walking in, being a show choir nerd — Carla Doles is a legend, like one of the original OGs of show choir. She was one of those that the ground floor helped build what show choir is now,” Doyle said. “So taking over that legacy was kind of daunting. Coming from a place of ‘OK, there’s nowhere to go, but up,’ was actually kind of nice. Sounds crazy, but it was it was kind of nice to just be able to be like, ‘OK, it is what it is. We’re gonna go out here and we’re

just going to have fun the first year, we’re going to just kind of re-find that love of performing. And those kids just really ran with that.”

The teams have also embraced Doyle’s, admittedly, eclectic music tastes and inspiration. Show choir performances are, essentially, a roughly 20-minute juke-box musical of sorts, complete with costuming, set design, choreography, vocal arrangements and live instrumental accompaniment.

Doyle and his wife, Brittany, work together on arrangements, leaning into inspiration as it strikes. Last year, the two planned a performance themed around radium girls, the women who contracted radiation poisoning while working in early 20th-century factories. The set included the punk rock song “Radium Girls” by Tom Morello & The Bloody Beetroots.

Tyler and Brittany then worked with Greg “Bubba” Bussiere for choreography. Bussiere is located in Massachusetts and periodically flies out to teach or review choreography. He partners with a number of school show choirs along the East Coast and Midwest.

In league with some much larger groups, NHS held its own in competitions with roughly 20 students between the girls’ and combined groups last school year.

“I always just say, ‘We’re going to go out there and just take a big swing. And if we strike out, we’re gonna at least strike out swinging,’” Doyle said. “So that’s

(Continued on Page 39)



Tyler Doyle

Carrying the torch, feeling the heat

United Way Director Ben Renkenberger reflects on his first year in the position.

By SYDNEY KENT

The day was not particularly different, nor was the situation — someone needing help — for Ben Renkenberger. Still, he was concerned.

After many years in human services of some form, and one year serving as the executive director of the United Way of Wells County, Renkenberger is accustomed to the calls. Some callers are desperate for food, he explained. Others are facing an eviction or are quite literally sitting in the dark because the utilities were cut off.

Several forms of assistance are available through the United Way, both for organizations and individuals. One area of funding allocated to helping citizens in the county is called the “Faith Fund.” Renkenberger said he leans on the help and guidance of Lisa Eubank, who has helped residents with the fund for years. Eubank is a foundational piece of the day-to-day operations of the local branch.

The woman who entered the long list of people in need recently took both Renkenberger and Eubank by surprise. She requested a ride to access critically needed medical services. Renkenberger said that the situation raised some red flags for potential domestic violence or even a human trafficking situation. He reached out for more help from the proper authorities before continuing to the next task of his day. Renkenberger said the experience said a lot about the state of the world right now.

“People are struggling more, truthfully,” Renkenberger said. “I think about the hole we would leave behind if we were not here. Traditionally, the United Way in Wells County was more fundraising and giving grants to various nonprofits. In the last several years especially, we have continued to pivot to more in-house programs to fill the gaps in the community that we see affecting people in a very real way.”

Renkenberger explained in addition to the Faith Fund, a critical resource, the main efforts of the Wells County United Way are aimed at providing childhood development opportunities for youth. He said former executive director Pamela Beckford laid a strong foundation for the work he is continuing.

Beckford worked with UW for over 23 years, helping bring programs like Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Through the Imagination Library, free books are given out to registered kids from birth to age 5 every year in the county. Renkenberger said the organization recently cel-



Ben Renkenberger (left) with Lisa Eubank preparing for United Way’s annual toy drive last fall. (Photo by Sydney Kent)

brated reaching over 200,000 books to kids in the area.

One new program, Bookends, recently concluded its first year of being active in all four county schools.

“Bookends is a program for children that are not quite ready for first grade and are facing being held back,” Renkenberger explained. “United Way provides a supportive intervention specialist to be in the school once per week at a minimum. We do our best to make sure they’re ready. The (Wells County Foundation) has graciously helped fund \$15,000 of that program.”

Renkenberger said that in his time since joining the organization, he has been moved by the generosity and commitment to the community by various

organizations and donors. Valero, a local business in Bluffton, has raised a significant amount of money in recent years. Renkenberger estimated that Valero’s efforts assist with approximately 30% of the annual budget.

Moving forward, Renkenberger hopes to continue to expand these programs, as well as raise additional funding for organizations working to provide support to the Wells County community. Renkenberger also hopes to apply skills he has learned while participating in the Wells County Leadership Academy.

Anyone with an interest in volunteering their time, applying for a grant, or donating to local programming may contact Renkenberger at UWDirector@unitwaywells.org. ♦

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Seniors' 'special bond' led to a state finals berth

"From going to third grade to going all the way to state is an amazing feeling," Dekota Hubble said. That pretty much summed it up, speaking for her fellow teammates of Norwell High School's girls' basketball team as they prepared for the state finals in February.

Six seniors — Makenzie Fuess, Dekota Hubble, Annabelle Johnson, Lilly Norris, Haley Green, and Ali Riley — played on the same team for 10 years. A seventh senior, Kennedy Fuelling, joined the group in middle school.

They grew up living and breathing the game and doing it while representing Norwell on their jerseys. When the Eric Thornton-led girls' basketball team would play, the seven girls could be found sitting as close to the varsity benches as possible, idolizing and dreaming of doing the same someday.

What they accomplished in their high school years — three sectional titles, three Northeast 8 Conference titles, two regionals and a semi-state trophy — was made all the more meaningful by that special bond the girls had developed. As they prepared for state finals weekend, they reflected on those experiences.

Fuess shared, "Normally, whenever we would go to varsity games, we'd all sit behind the bench. Whenever it was sectionals, we would get pictures with their teams when we were younger. Just always looking up to them and always wanting to fill their shoes. That's kind of been a big thing for us."

Now they have, and they've gone further than all of the teams they grew up watching. This is the Knights' second state championship appearance since 1977, the year after the IHSAA started the tournament for the girls.

"We talked about how we went to all of the high school girls' games as they'd win and go further in the tournament as little girls," Norris said. "I think it's something we all dreamed about and it was in the back of all of our minds. Just seeing that come true and really start to take us places is really cool, — and that's what it means to us, knowing that we've dreamed of this."

"I think it's really fun to do it with this group of seniors because it's just a dream for everyone," Hubble said.

Some of their favorite memories together were getting milkshakes from McDonald's after tournaments or practices — also a way that coach Vic Reinhard would motivate the team to play at their best.

The team could also be found getting Pizza Hut after tournaments and after the season ended, haunted houses and Topgolf.

All of the team bonding and time they've spent together throughout the years has transitioned to the court. They have a deep

understanding of where each individual is going to be, along with their strengths and weaknesses.

The strong comradery between the team has given Thornton a chance to identify roles for each player. The six have been carrying trophies and medals around for a long time now, so the winning part was figured out at an early age.

Unfortunately, the girls were denied their ultimate goal of winning the 2024 state championship by Gibson Southern. But it took a record-breaking performance to beat them. The Titans made 11 three-pointers, an IHSAA record for a state championship game regardless of class, and held off a comeback charge by the Knights, who nearly overcame a 19-point deficit to lose at the buzzer by a 63-60 tally.

"I miss not being with this group in the offseason," Thornton had said as the final game approached, "and it's a season you look forward to. To be able to still reach our goals with one week left in the season doesn't happen very often, and we're certainly not going to take it for granted. I'm just very appreciative of all the support. This group means a lot to me."

Those friendships won't die out. They'll be moving on in different chapters of life, but fortunately, Fuelling, Fuess and Hubble are all playing college ball in the nearby Crossroads League.

Fuelling will go the furthest in distance to Marian, Fuess to St. Francis and Hubble to Huntington.

When asked if the rest of the girls would go watch them play, the room lit up immediately.

"Absolutely!" a few shouted.

"I'm going to make a sign!" said another.

Despite the loss, this Norwell team left a legacy future teams will be challenged to meet. This team went further than any other since the 1977 team.

But the loss still stings more than perhaps any of the team has had in their lifetime, especially for the seven seniors.

"There's emotion to this game within this same group and they have that same emotion that goes way beyond basketball," Thornton said after the final game. "That's why it hurts so much for them. The impact that they've made. How they've continued to mature and understand and realize how good they can be. How they see themselves has changed from a year ago. How tough they've become."

"It's an amazing program," Fuess said. "The way (Thornton) runs it. All of us girls, we all work together and it's hard to end this way and I'm really going to miss it. It's been the best four years of my life." ♦

Original reporting by Ryan Walker



The girls have won numerous championships in their time together since the third grade. Top photo, head coach Eric Thornton fills in for a middle school coach who was absent during a tournament. The girls pictured from left to right, Makenzie Fuess, Haley Green, Ali Riley and Dekota Hubble listen closely to what the parents said was their "Bob Knight." Middle from left to right, Green, Annabelle Johnson, Fuess and Hubble get the closest seat they can find to observe their favorite basketball team, the Norwell girls' varsity team. Above, Lily Norris, Ali Riley, Dekota Hubble, Kennedy Fuelling, Annabelle Johnson, Haley Green and Makenzie Fuess group together for a photo during Norwell's state championship media day at the high school in February.



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Hands-on labs, career days provide insights, opportunities for BHS students

By JESSICA BRICKER

Offering free college credits to Bluffton High School students is the latest opportunity Bluffton-Harrison Metropolitan School District is providing to ensure students are equipped for success after graduation.

From the halls of Bluffton-Harrison Elementary and Bluffton-Harrison Middle schools to the aisles of graduation, students have the opportunity to explore career options in innovative, state-of-the-art settings at every level.

“Our district intentionally seeks out opportunities for students’ success at all our schools,” BHMSD Superintendent Brad Yates says. “BHMSD is fully committed to the early investment of our students to ascend into greatness as graduates of Bluffton High School in both formal higher education, as well as career and technical education certifications.”

Planting the early seeds for the future

One spring day this school year, fourth grade students at BHES learned first-hand about marketing jobs, medical careers and what it’s like to be a judge during the school’s annual Career Day program.

“Grade 4 students participate in classroom guidance lessons to learn about different types of career categories and what might be a good fit for them. These lessons are followed up with a Career Day where students are able to hear from professionals in our community,” says Ashley Kilgore, school counselor at BHES who organizes the annual event. “Our students enjoy getting to hear speakers from various industries as they begin exploring the idea of what they might do after high school graduation.”

BHES students have the chance to learn about careers even earlier, particularly in the farm experiential preschool classroom, which just concluded its inaugural school year. The curriculum is centered around the farming industry, even including a special visit from a farmer on his tractor. While students were busy having fun counting eggs, plowing in the sand with toy farming equipment and taking care of a barn of horses, they were learning about the various facets of a farmer’s career.

In the upcoming BHES experiential classroom, preschool students will get to learn about careers in construction and engineering.



Wells Circuit Court Judge Kent Kiracofe speaks with fourth graders at Career Day about the judicial branch. (Photos by Jessica Bricker)

Systematic career exposure continues to grow at BHES. BHMSD is preparing to break ground on the “Our Town” safety village. BHES educators wrote the curriculum for the safety village, incorporating local industries in their lessons. A partnership with trades students at Southern Wells has led to the addition of a miniaturized Bluffton City Hall for the safety village as well.

“We hope to be able to incorporate lessons for students about helping others, on pedestrian safety (and) emergency safety,” says second grade teacher Joey Villaneuva, who helped write the curriculum. “I’m hoping to build some lessons based on different businesses within our community. There will also be some bicycle safety lessons, and then also careers that you can have within our community. It’s going to be a place to go where kids can practice these skills, learn these skills and to see just a little version of our community.”

Students learn in new hands-on career lab

As students head to BHMS, they will now have the opportunity to get unique hands-on experiences in career exploration.

During the 2023-24 spring semester, students at BHMS learned in and explored the new Preparing for College and Careers classroom.

With \$200,000 from the Don Wood Foundation, the Triple E Exploration Center has transformed the way seventh and eighth graders can examine possible careers. Featuring museum-quality stations, a touch-top interactive table and classroom “career cluster” kits, students will get to explore all 16 of the career clusters — including those like culinary arts, welding and electrical manufacturing, which are all career and technical education courses offered at BHS.

“The exposure to a variety of career opportunities will serve as a spark to ignite the future success of all our students,” Dr. Yates says.

Students get the chance to explore careers in a way that is unique to BHMS.

“This class is quickly evolving and so is the classroom,” says Krista Baxter, PCC teacher. “Students are very interested in the new interactive displays and our current kits. I’m looking forward to even more changes that are coming with the new curriculum. The new modules will be very engaging and realistic. I can’t wait to watch my students explore and discover more about themselves and possible careers.”

Additionally, one week a year, BHMS students spend time each day learning about what opportunities may lie ahead for them. “College Go Week” makes the future fun by showing students their

options.

Each day is themed and visitors come in during lunch periods, including military representatives and BHS career and technical education teachers.

“I think a lot of our kids get excited because a lot of times, when they think about after high school, they just think about college, and there’s so much more that they can be exposed to and they can see,” says Stephanie White, school social worker for BHMSD. “Our high school (CTE) teachers do a great job of coming over and just talking about their programs and giving light to different career fields, so it’s really awesome.”

A door-decorating contest is a friendly competition requiring students to research areas of study and other highlights of an Indiana college or university. Plus, in the BHMS school counseling virtual office, parents and students can explore many online resources for college and career preparation.

This designated week provides students with an early glimpse at a focal point for the final stop in their educational journey through BHMSD: The “Triple E” approach at BHS.

Approaching career readiness with intention

Citing their work in preparing BHMSD students for post-graduation success, BHMS and BHS school counselors were recognized in May 2023 with an Award of Excellence for Outstanding Secondary School Counseling/Career Services Program from the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet.

This includes the high school’s focus on helping every student find their path to Enroll, Enlist or Employ. These options are examined in detail during the annual Triple E Day, an event that highlights numerous guest speakers in each of the three areas.

One of the speakers last fall for the fourth annual Triple E Day was Kaitlyn Tungate, a 2023 BHS graduate who enlisted in the Marines after graduating from BHS. After sharing her experiences with students, she said the Triple E approach at BHS undoubtedly impacted her decision to enlist and the exposure to recruiters while in high school started her down her service path.

BHS Principal Steve Baker says the Triple E philosophy provides all students with a plan for post-graduation.



Above left, 2023 BHS graduate Kaitlyn Tungate visited her alma mater last fall to talk about her experiences enlisting in the Marines as part of the school's annual Triple E Day. At right, BHS electrical instructor Chris Kruchkow speaks to a BHMS student during the 2023 College Go Week.

"The diploma's great, but we want to offer more," he says. "So for our students, we ask them to be intentional about what they want to do after school."

Speaking on Triple E, co-valedictorian for the Class of 2024 Claire Craighead says the rigor of the coursework at BHS has prepared her for post-graduation. Fellow class of 2024 graduates Chris Geisman says the BHS welding program has given him the confidence to pursue welding as a career, and Jesse Matlock says he was introduced to a recruiter at BHS and is joining the Army National Guard with a welding certification and an interest in pursuing trade school with his military benefits.

These career-readiness efforts from preschool through grade 12 culminated in the financial backing by the BHMSD Board of School Trustees this April to implement Indiana College Core for interested BHS students at no cost to them and their families beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. Additionally, students will also be able to pursue career technical education certifications at no cost.

ICC at BHS will utilize the school's own credentialed staff who teach dual credit and Advanced Placement courses, as well as local colleges who offer dual enrollment courses. The district's financial support will offset the burden families often face when BHS students consider enrolling in college-level courses or pursuing CTE certifications.

"Implementing the Indiana College Core at Bluffton High School will continue to expand the opportunities that students have in their exploration and prepa-

ration for what post-secondary opportunities are possible for them," says Sebastian Baxter, BHS school counselor. "The ICC helps to not only reduce the barriers that college-bound students face, but it gives them the confidence that they are prepared to succeed when they do take that next step."

Preparing all students for the future

A districtwide approach to career readiness has produced results. The BHS Class of 2023 earned a 100% graduation rate, landing it among the elite high schools in the state. Mr. Baker says the accomplishment takes total buy-in from students, parents and teachers alike.

"It takes a K-12 effort so that students are prepared to earn their diploma on time and have the skills necessary for the next phase of their lives," Mr. Baker says.

For one new BHS graduate, the effort from all paid off in a big way.

"Bluffton High School has prepared me for college and life after high school in a multitude of ways, starting with its incredible staff," says Ella Wheeler, 2024 BHS graduate and the latest Lilly Community Scholar recipient for Wells County. "The faculty and staff at Bluffton High School works endlessly to ensure that their students are prepared for life after high school, and have a plan tailored to them, whether that is going to college, trade school, working full time, or joining the military.

"I am so thankful for the incredible staff at Bluffton," she adds, "for continually pouring into my education and my future." ♦

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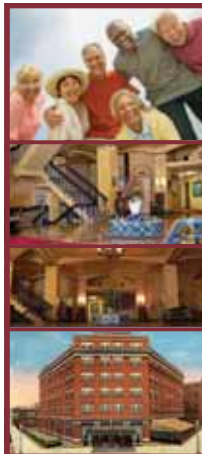
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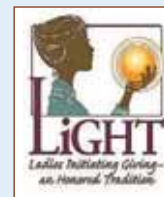
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Hannah Gerber

(Continued from Page 23)

But the couple raised their children “to become responsible and independent,” Jami Gerber said, and they believed the job would “broaden (Hannah’s) horizon and open her eyes and develop her character in so many amazing ways.”

They also said they thought the job would help Gerber develop a “thicker skin” and “soft heart” as she learned to problem solve and work with people raised with different values and priorities.

They wondered, for instance, if people would “test” her faith, though they didn’t think she would ever renounce it.

And in fact, Chad Gerber said, he thinks she now trusts God more.

They also discussed appropriate boundaries with people, whether passengers, coworkers, or pilots.

Fortunately, Gerber said, she primarily flies with older, married, and mature pilots — men who wouldn’t misinterpret her friendliness, though one did offer Gerber a Starbucks gift card if she spoke in an Australian accent during the flight, she said laughing.

(She agreed — and she earned it.)

Furthermore, Chad Gerber said he appreciates knowing that these pilots would protect Gerber if need be.

Fortunately, they haven’t yet needed to, but one afternoon in May 2023, one passenger could have made it necessary.

About six months after starting the job, Gerber welcomed a man to the flight out of Toronto, but he refused to make eye contact as he silently walked to his seat in the back.

“He just seem off-settled,” she said.

A few minutes later, Gerber heard the back flight attendant call the captain to alert him that this man had hit another passenger — and now refused to leave the plane.

Gerber did not witness the incident, but she later learned that the man hit a “sweet Canadian girl” in her 20s who placed her arm on his arm rest. Apparently, he kept nudging it off, but she kept putting it back.

So he slapped her.

Gerber said she doesn’t know if he slapped her on the face or the arm, but it didn’t matter. Though the pilot was preparing to take off, he taxied the plane back to the jet bridge (the walkway connecting the plane to the terminal) and two police officers boarded.

And then, much to Gerber’s surprise, they told her to tell the passenger to leave.

So she did.

Though surprised, she didn’t feel nervous, she said. In fact, she didn’t even think about any techniques from her one day of self-defense training. (Fortunately,

she said with a laugh, she knew how to defend herself after growing up with two brothers.)

Once she reached the passenger’s seat, she told the man that he needed to leave and informed him that two officers would arrest him if he didn’t comply.

He didn’t. Instead, he started yelling at Gerber, defending his actions and “acting like a 2-year-old. I couldn’t get two words in,” she said.

Finally, the officers came, got within an inch of the passenger’s face, and threatened to arrest him, Gerber said. But he told them that they would need to kill him first. And Gerber, who had moved to the back, was laughing.

“Whenever I get nervous, I can’t help but laugh,” she said.

Meanwhile, the officers had counted to 10, but the passenger had grabbed on to his seat and refused to let go, forcing one officer to pull him off from the front while the other officer pushed him up from behind, Gerber said.

At one point, she also said, one of the officers pulled his stun gun, but they successfully handcuffed the passenger without needing any additional force — about 90 minutes after the plane was scheduled to depart.

As the officers escorted the man off the plane, Gerber, who needed to give her statement, followed.

About 10 minutes later, Gerber reboarded. No one spoke. Some shook their heads. All of them waited for someone to do or say something. So Gerber did.

“I just yelled, ‘Who’s ready to go to Charlotte?’” And the passengers erupted in applause and cheer.



Hannah Gerber had an eye-level view of the Northern Lights during one of her flights. (Photo provided)



Hannah Gerber, a Wells County resident and flight attendant for American Airlines, said she occasionally takes power naps on the plane on busy days. Fortunately, she’s never needed to go outside the plane to find a spot to sleep. (Photo provided)

“There’s never a dull moment,” she said.

As the “eyes and ears” of the plane, Gerber said she knows she might need to confront other passengers one day. But she doesn’t worry, she said, because she knows that she can trust in God’s control.

But she doesn’t know when this season will end.

Certainly, she enjoys the perks, like the free flights to Greece, Australia, and

Hawaii. She even arranged for her parents to fly to Florida for free for their 30th anniversary.

She also enjoys befriending the other flight attendants, who have traveled with her on these trips. She enjoys the rare opportunities to sit in the cockpit when one of the pilots needs to use the restroom.

But when — and if — it ends, she hopes to still find joy in the next journey, she said. ♦

Norwell show choirs

(Continued from Page 30)

kind of my thought process when we're designing shows — like what's something that someone would look at 12 to 14 kids on stage and be like, 'Oh, that group would never do this.' And we're gonna do it. We're just going to go out there. And we're going to prove everybody wrong."

And in many ways, they have.

This past year, the show choirs have earned placements at multiple competitions — including several division first places and awards for best choreography and best vocals. In sharing with the school district's board of trustees, Doyle described the success as somewhat sneaking up on the group — in the moment, it was easy to forget the growth that had occurred over the year.

"It's one of the things that as a director, you always try to balance of like, 'Hey, we're really killing this,' but still not getting comfortable," Doyle said.

Looking forward, Doyle's set a goal to get 20% of the NHS student body — just over 60 students — involved in either show choir or vocal performance. A large part of his focus will be on garnering interest in younger students, which will be aided by the addition of a full-time middle school choir teacher.

Doyle also plans to take the choirs to larger competitions, competing against students from other states.

But most importantly, Doyle hopes to continue fostering a close-knit, passionate group — just like the one where his dreams began.

"It is surreal. It is so surreal, it really is," he said. "There are a couple of times that contests where I just sit there — this is the dream like, this is the thing I wanted to do ... It's very cool to get to share that with them. My goal (in) getting into teaching was just to have half the impact that my director had. And it's been above and beyond what I ever imagined." ♦

Back home again

(Continued from Page 17)

the Rose Bowl. It's now a conference game in the expanded Big Ten Conference, and John feels he has to be there.

That trip provides a snapshot into the Vanderkolks' travels — a seminar in Reno, Nevada; a baseball game in Oakland, California; a seminar in Ohio (Pam will stay in Bluffton for that one); then the seminar in Colorado and the football game in the Rose Bowl.

"We take breaks and share the driving," Pam says. "We've had a lot of practice."

Pam wants to go to Alaska. They saw the place once on a cruise, but she actually wants to be on the ground and look around.

"I just want to go to Denali and the national parks," she said. "It's going to be a long trip, but that's OK."

Speaking of cruises, they want to do a river cruise in Europe. "We're looking at the Rhine," Pam says.

"We've already seen the Danube," John says.

Of course they have. ♦



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Gideon Gerber

(Continued from Page 18)

blasts caused the thief to jump six feet into the air,” according to an account in the Evening Banner. The thief claimed to be “Mexican,” while living in a Curryville migrant colony located in the direction he was fleeing. Raymond “Daddy” Durr, then 33 and not yet a sheriff, had been sleeping and jumped himself as the posse raced down the track to capture the runaway thief. Sheriff Bowman took the bandit, caught red-handed, into custody. Young Amos, 22, instructed Craigville restaurateur Frank Diehl “to serve the boys with a chili con carne supper a la Mexican style some evening next week, all the cost to be met by Gerber. Bluffton newspaper men... among the guests,” as published by a 1933 Bluffton newspaper reporter.

Gideon became the bank’s president in 1939, Amos taking his former role as cashier, son-in-law Dennis Moser assistant cashier. Amos began bookkeeping at

“Have faith in yourself and your Maker. Go to Sunday School and Church. Then you can be successful — it is up to you.”

— Gideon Gerber

the bank in Craigville on his 16th birthday. Gideon remained a proponent of nepotism. When the bank began, daughter Emma held a position and her groom, Eli Phister, secured a job at the Craigville Elevator upon marriage.

Amos’ son, John, confirmed his father’s Lancaster Center (later called Central) High School graduation in 1930, although having already secured a lifetime position with the bank. John, now retired from his banking career and serving on the Bluffton Parks board, said “He had to beg his father (Gideon) to allow him to finish high school. Amos did so, complete with serving on a fine basketball team.”

President Gideon Gerber was stopped by three men dressed as police, kidnapped, pistol whipped, and robbed of \$12,000 being transported to Bluffton in 1941 from Fort Wayne. It made national news. No bandits were caught; the crime never solved.

Gideon bought a Lake Wawasee home in 1944 and “still worked at the bank when I felt like it,” he wrote. He had

nized.”

The original run in 1975 saw Jerry Pierce of Muncie finish first with a time of 1:24:32. Fernando Cabada from Fresno California holds the overall record at 1:06:47. Cabada used this race as a warm-up for Olympic trials, according to Sundling.

While the run was originally held on Street Fair weekend, it was moved to Labor Day weekend in 2009. The Fort-4Fitness half-marathon in Fort Wayne moved close to Street Fair weekend, which led to a conflict for runners as most are unwilling to run half-marathons on two consecutive weekends. With an intense schedule and a lack of advertising power compared to Fort Wayne, the decision was made to move the Trot. The move has seen a drop in participants from its peak of approximately 300 to 400 runners.

“And so we (the Parlor City Trot Committee) knew that to compete with them, either on the same weekend or even the weekend before or after, was going to be difficult because people aren’t running two half-marathons, typically on back-to-back weekends.” Parks Department Sports Coordinator Laurie Baumgartner said. “So it just seemed like a (necessary) choice to move it to Labor Day. And not



Another historical building in Craigville still stands although it received a number significant changes after Gideon Gerber purchased what had been the Hotel Hower and converted it into a home for his family.

evolved from poor parents who never completed school. Mother Caroline never did learn to read or write. Yet they succeeded beyond measure.

Gideon left behind these words: “Have faith in yourself and your Maker. Go to Sunday School and Church. Then you can be successful — it is up to you.” ♦



These two oil paintings of Gideon (left) and Amos Gerber are housed in the Wells County Historical Museum.

Parlor City Trot

(Continued from Page 12)

“I wanted to go around the lake out to the State Park and around the buffalo pens,” Talbert said. “Because I thought it would be interesting for the runners to (go through). Lots of times they’re just on flat land just going to and fro, and there isn’t anything cool about it. And I thought they would love going through the park.”

The result was a 13.1-mile course that started on Market Street, in the heart of the street fair festivities. Runners would then head along Elm Grove Road with a piece of Indiana farmland the backdrop through that stretch. A loop through the state park gave runners a scenic view of the buffalo pens and other natural beauties. After the loop, runners would head down the Rivergreenway, the Wabash River’s waters running alongside before hitting the finish line near Pickett’s Run Park.

“There’s nothing really challenging about the route,” Sundling said. “There’s no hills, there’s no dips, there’s no rough terrain, there’s no long stretches of, ‘When’s this gonna end!’ ... For people who are dedicated to running it’s an enjoyable scene to go (run) and it’s orga-



compete with any other big local half marathons.”

Despite the attendance drop, the Trot remains a cherished event. Even though awards are given out to the top finishers, the thrill of bettering yourself is critical to enjoying running, according to Sundling.

“Your personal record is yours,” Sundling said. “And if there’s 10 people out there that are going faster than that, you still have your personal record whether you get a trophy or not. You could look at some of these people who are running ... five minutes, two minutes faster than what you’ve done before. And you’re still in a place where that’s your personal record. Nobody can take that away from you.”

The longevity of the event speaks to the dedication of the Parlor City Trot Committee and the Parks Department as a whole. While the magic and mystique of the Street Fair weekend may be gone from the event, it can still be a time where the community comes together, supporting each other.

“There just aren’t that many races that have been continuously run for 50 years,” Baumgartner said. “So that makes it kind of unique ... And also, I think, when it started, it was kind of this (phenomenon). People were coming home for a street fair. There weren’t as many runs back in 1973, ’74 and ’75. So it’s unique, it is special.” ♦

Wells County Trails

(Continued from Page 9)

Site, for instance, will make those easier to contend with on future plans to add access sites on the Salamonie River in the western portion of Wells County as well as on the Wabash River north of Bluffton, Lautzenheiser said.

Meanwhile, much as he hopes the engineering work smooths out potential problems along the S.R. 124 trail, the regional taskforce planning the Poka-Bache trail is hoping to simplify the enormity of that task by seeking a federal grant to design the entire route.

Lautzenheiser, who is a member of that taskforce, is hesitant to say when the Poka-Bache might be completed. Though more than 50% of the route is already complete, there are many pieces to that puzzle that still must fall into place — including connecting Bluffton to Ossian and Ossian to Fort Wayne.

Locally, there are also “spurs” to consider — offshoots from primary trails that could connect to the YMCA, for instance, or to Norwell High School.

“Trail projects take a long time,” he said. “People get on Facebook and think we should start digging the next day.”

But getting the engineering work done for the entire route all at once, he says, rather than in piecemeal fashion, could cut 10 years off the process. ♦

Golf marks a century

(Continued from Page 11)

annual club championship was a fairly big deal, Blaine would win about a dozen of them and Bruce five times. Nearly half of those championships during this time were won by someone named Imel.

The family's legacy continued into the next generation. Blaine's sons established a tradition on the Norwell High School golf team that was followed by siblings and cousins Andrew, Justin, Kyle, Drew, Taylor and Kaylee. Justin played college golf at Huntington and Drew at Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne. They both took a shot at professional tournament golf before settling in to other careers. Kaylee played at Western Michigan University and Taylor at Marian University in Indianapolis.

"They all cut their teeth on this course," Bruce Imel said, and gave them opportunities including college. He had earned a golf scholarship at Huntington University as did Blaine. Bruce Imel has been inducted into the Huntington University Athletic Hall of Fame.

So yes, there are those personal, family and historical connections that spur him to keep the course open and operating, but

that's just a part of what motivates him.

The course is on a more solid financial footing as it begins its second century than it has been in years, Imel said. He and his eight employees are seeing an increasing number of players, many from outside the county who are complimentary. He began the Imel Golf Academy in 2019 that has drawn anywhere from 30 to 50 youth the past several summers. Imel averages 100 or more lessons a year spread out over three semesters per season. Two high schools and two middle schools call the course home



Bruce Imel

"There's been a lot of conjecture about what's been going on out here, we still have a lot of doubters about us," Imel said. "But I've heard it many times this year that the course is in better shape than it's been in quite a while. The new holes are maturing, coming along."

So what motivates Bruce Imel to work seemingly endless hours in order to keep the course open? There is a smile.

"Well, it's a fact that no one has been able to make this course profitable for 100 years," he said. "I want to show that it's possible for this course to be sustainable. And in the end, if it is not, I will have no regrets." ♦

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Bi-County clients pursue community jobs

By TANYA ISCH CAYLOR

For much of the 20 years he's been a client of Bi-County Services, Daniel Wilson was considered too volatile and unfocused to participate in the agency's sheltered workshop.

But since the agency closed its workshop at the end of 2022 — adapting to new federal rules requiring that adults with intellectual disabilities be integrated into the community — Wilson is among a growing number of BCS clients who are either working or volunteering in Wells County.

Nearly one-fourth of BCS's 68 Wells County clients now work community jobs. (BCS also serves clients in Adams county, some of whom work in Berne or Decatur.)

Kroger is the largest Wells County employer of BCS clients with four. Christian Care employs three — including Stacey Quinones, who this spring marked her 31st year working in the facility's laundry department.

BCS's longest working client is Christina McFarren, who has been employed at Richard's Restaurant in Bluffton for 38 years. Only the restaurant's owners have worked there longer.

"Chris is great. She's like family," said Deeda Yoder, Richard's co-owner and vice president of the 11-restaurant chain. "She shows up to work every day, and she does whatever we need her to do."

Other clients, such as Wilson, are learning job skills and social etiquette by volunteering. The 39-year-old began volunteering at Ouabache State Park last fall with a group of other clients, helping trim back foliage on trails and picking up sticks in areas that require mowing.

This spring he added volunteering one hour per week at Bargain Hut to his schedule. Though he continues to work on his focusing abilities, he has proved adept at spotting defects in donated clothing.

"This one's got a date on it," he said, tossing a T-shirt in the discard bin during one recent session. Dated logos on shirts makes them less likely to sell; these are passed on to Goodwill.

Wilson is one of five BCS clients who regularly volunteer at Bargain Hut throughout the week. "We're glad to have them," said Judy Brown, manager of the nonprofit thrift shop that raises money for the Wells County EMS. "They help us, and we help them."

BCS clients are even more involved with Feeding Tomorrow's Future Today, also known as the Backpack Program. One group of clients helps pack bags of



Above left: Bi-County Services client Daniel Wilson, left, sorts clothing at Bargain Hut with his BCS program manager, Jimmie Jackson. Wilson volunteers at the nonprofit thrift shop on Mondays. Above right: BCS clients Jenyca Holocher, left, and Adam McLeod volunteer at Bargain Hut on Friday afternoons. (Photos by Tanya Isch Caylor)

donated food items each month, while another group delivers the bags to local schools the following day. In April, BCS clients donated \$2,500 to the program using a Pay It Forward grant from AWS Foundation.

Other nonprofits BCS clients volunteer with include Forgotten Children, The Closet at Family Centered Services, the Salvation Army, the Wells County Public Library, and the 4-H Foundation, which uses BCS volunteers at the 4-H Pancake Booth at Street Fair and at the Mini Golf Booth during the 4-H Fair.

No longer having the Sheltered Workshop available means BCS clients have had to step outside their comfort zone to earn extra money or work on skills.

It hasn't necessarily been easy. Matt Hower struggled in two initial attempts at working in the fast food industry. But in his third try, at River Terrace, he seems to have found his niche as a dishwasher.

"He comes in with a good attitude," said cook Marcia Miller, who said she enjoys working with him.

Hower said what he likes best about his job — besides the extra money — is "making friends and doing my job right."

One morning in May, in between breakfast and lunch at River Terrace, Hower was rinsing pots and pans and loading them into an industrial dish washer. When they were clean and dry, he loaded them onto a cart he pushed into the next room to put items away on the appropriate shelves.

"He's moving from waiting to be told what to do to just doing it," said BCS Direct Support Professional Warren McLellan, who assisted Hower in finding the job and works with him on improving his performance.

McLellan explained that the better Hower learns the routine, the more comfortable he is and the more willing to pick up hours — which then makes him that much more comfortable and confident.

McLellan, who has worked as a job coach in the past, said it's important that clients avoid a mindset in which they are only focused on their paycheck "because that's unsustainable."

"Their attitude has to assist them in helping them figure out how to make the work enjoyable," he explained. "Because that's something everyone has to do, whether or not you have a disability."

Wilson has had more obstacles to overcome due to a background of behavioral issues that, in retrospect, may have been tied to the classroom structure used at BCS prior to the Covid pandemic.

Without constant reminders of his previous self-image as someone who always got in trouble in school — and living with a common-law wife who works full-time — has opened his mind to the possibility of someday getting a job of his own.

"He has gotten better at staying on task and in learning the procedures for where different items are meant to be placed," said Wilson's BCS program manager, Jimmie Jackson, who assists him in his



Christina McFarren, left, with Richard's Restaurant vice president and co-owner Deeda Yoder. As of this summer, McFarren will have worked at the restaurant for 39 years.

volunteer efforts.

More importantly, Jackson said, "he has gained a true understanding of what it means to volunteer without receiving an award in return. It's been a process, but he has done well from the start in my opinion." ♦

The easy life

(Continued from Page 21)

he may not want to track someone for several miles — he does want to find things. Even if it involves putting his entire head into the oven or standing on the countertops, Campbell said.

Throughout his eight years of service, Leo was deployed over 1,000 times. He assisted in locating wanted and missing people, finding drugs, and tracking items. Leo was also voted by the News-Banner as Wells County's "Best Police Officer" for four years in a row.

"There was a time when a guy crashed his motorcycle," Campbell recounted. "He fled the scene and was clearly on drugs when I found him. He took a swing at me and took off. Leo really protected me and (it was) probably his and (my)

stand-out moment together."

Campbell explained that he gives Leo a set of tasks to complete in order to help him with his desire to work. For example, Leo enjoys assisting with retrieving the mail.

Leo is the second police dog Campbell has had in the last decade. His first dog, Egon, worked with Campbell for several years of his service with the Wells County Sheriff's Department. Campbell said Egon lived just over three years after his retirement, all of which were spent with him and his wife.

Campbell plans to work alongside an additional police dog after its training, which can be a lengthy process. He explained that not every animal is meant to do the work, just as not every human is able to perform the same occupation. Campbell recounted one particular case

earlier in his career that ultimately solidified his passion for working with police dogs.

"There was a case with a four-year-old child that was murdered in Ossian," Campbell began. "We spent all night looking for any evidence. We didn't even know if this was where the crime happened, it included a 25-acre farm, and we were searching on foot with flashlights — for anything. We called a dog from the DNR that specialized in gunpowder. The dog went about 100 yards, circled back, and found a gun used in the crime in about 10 seconds. From that moment, I knew this was what I wanted to do. I looked all night and searched the garden many times and I couldn't find it. It was one of the coolest things I have ever seen."

Campbell said the largest case Leo was a part of took place at the end of his career

when Leo located \$20,000 worth of methamphetamine. Leo also assisted in many cases where tracking was needed, a job he enjoyed greatly.

"Tracking is really an art form," Campbell said. "It's not just a machine, dogs are not machines. They have emotions, and they get distracted."

"I remember doing searches in the McDonald's parking lot. French fries were more important than catching bad guys. But to find somebody is very rewarding. Trusting your dog that he knows what he's doing is important."

Leo is experiencing retirement very similarly to a human who spent their career ready to protect and serve. He's learning when to slow down, enjoying treats (and acid reflux) and despite his head-rearing shenanigans with the oven — being a very good boy. ♦

Bluffton's newest

(Continued from Page 12)

space. "Things like the disc golf and foot golf take up a lot of space," she said. "We don't want to clutter up the park."

The development of the park has delighted former Bluffton Common Council member Roger Thornton, who formerly represented Bluffton's 1st Council District. Thornton ran for office on a platform that wanted Lancaster Park developed, saying that too much of the city's recreational facilities were located south of his district and very little on the north side.

However, what's happening at Lancaster Park receives Thornton's blessing.

"I think it's far beyond what any of us thought it would be," he said. "I would like to give credit to Brandy Fiechter." He also saluted the various donors to the park. Fiechter says that many of the improvements occurred because those donors stepped up. That includes the latest improvements. Some of those were not in the original park plans and she says

their inclusion would not have happened without the donated funds.

Thornton added, however, that he'd still like to see a baseball complex built somewhere for use of Bluffton and Wells County residents. He says, for example, that there's been talk of using land at the Lancaster Elementary School or Norwell Middle School. The baseball complex was Thornton's primary proposal for the park's improvement.

"I still have hopes for that," he said. "I think there's a lot of support for it in the community."

The Rivergreenway extension will pick up where the current trail ends at the intersection of North Main and Monroe streets. Those using the trail will pick it up on the east side of the street, in front of Lowe's; it follows the west side of the street from its start at the Wabash River.

The trail will go north and will cut east between the iTown Church structure, which is currently under construction, and the Jehovah's Witnesses house of worship in the 2700 block of North Main Street. The trail will then enter Lancaster Park. ♦



While some elements of Lancaster Park have been completed, such as the pavilion and the basketball court, details of the playground and the re-building of the parking lot are being finished in June. (News-Banner file photo)



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With membership growing, Boys & Girls club to expand to second floor for classrooms

By BARBARA BARBIERI

A need for more space to accommodate the growth in the numbers of young people using the services of the Wells Community Boys & Girls Club has led the Board of Directors to agree to expanding to their building's second floor for classroom space.

Currently the club has 136 members, ages 5 to 18, with the numbers growing yearly. The expansion to the second floor will add three classrooms and rest room facilities and allow for more programs to be offered. A stairway to the area already exists.

Director Vicki Bell and her staff are excited about the possibilities as they gear up for the 2024 summer activities that will include "Be a Space Scientist" for ages 8 to 10. This program, to be led by staff member Veronica Garza, is in conjunction with the Indiana State Museum.

Museum members will train the staff here as well as supply the materials for the four-week program. Explored will be rockets, space suits and plants.

Other activities offered at the Summer Club will be: A volleyball camp offered

for both boys and girls ages 9-12 and teens from June 3-7; "Art Adventures" for all ages; "Mario Master Krouse" (race car theme) for ages 8 through teens; and "Calling All Adventurers!" for ages 10 through teens.

During the year the "Smart Girls," "Passport to Manhood" and "Reading to Julie Laforge's Dog" have been included.

Another popular program now offered is the Words of Wisdom (WOW) Cafe, which offers a safe place for discussions of tough subjects with friends. Subjects that have been discussed have been teen pregnancies, dating abuse, drugs/substance abuse, smoking and other topics as the staff has seen the need.

The group meets in the cafe area; along with the discussions, snacks are offered.

Another popular event is the Staff vs. Board Members competition in corn hole games.

Current Board Members are: Dan Lipp, chair; Pete Humphrey, vice-chair; Doug Lehman, treasurer; Dan Pfister, Nick Huffman, Cyndee Fiechter, Todd Reimschisel, Rick Singer, Danielle Thompson, Ken Ballinger, Veronica



The current staff is ready to be instructors for events at the Boys & Girls Club this summer. Left to right are Elliott Apps, Ryan Ferguson, Simon Jones, Veronica Garcia, Orion Pearcy, Renee Brown, Margo Haiflich and Caroline Buskirk. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri)

Garza, Sue Campbell, Vicki Bell, director and Gene Bell.

Staff members include Vicki Bell (director), David Acuna, Renee Brown,

Sue Campbell, Ryan Ferguson, Veronica Garza, Margo Haiflich, Simon Jones, Abigail Nusbaumer, Orion Pearcy, Alicia Gordon and Elliot Apps (summer only). ♦

Most county grads will seek further education

By JUSTIN PEEPER

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

Fifty-five percent of Wells County's 2024 high-school graduates indicated they would attend a four-year college, while 12% plan to study at a two-year college or enter a technical, trade or vocational educational program.

In Wells County, 253 seniors — 67% — have plans to attend two- or four-year colleges this fall. In 2023, 72% of the 355 graduates from one of Wells County's public high schools said they would attend college.

The News-Banner spoke with guidance department officials at each public high school in mid-May and received information on 376 students from the Class of 2024.

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

According to the data, 55% of seniors from the Class of 2024 plan to attend a

Where are they going?

Here's a breakdown of what 2024 graduates of Wells County's three public high schools plan to do now that they've graduated:

	4-Year College	2-year College*	Military	Workforce**
Norwell (198 graduates)	127 64%	22 11%	4 2%	45 23%
Bluffton (123 graduates)	65 53%	6 5%	3 2%	49 40%
Southern Wells (55 graduates)	15 27%	18 33%	2 4%	20 36%

*Includes 2- or 3-year colleges and technical, trade, associate, vocational education programs or apprenticeships.

** Includes some graduates who will fill their time doing something else or who were undecided.

Source: Wells County public schools/The News-Banner

four-year college. In 2023, 55% also indicated that they would attend a four-year college.

Twelve percent of this year's graduates — 46 students — plan to attend two-year colleges or enter a technical, trade, associate, vocational or apprenticeship programs this fall. In 2023, 17% of students — 60 graduates — planned to pur-

sue a two-year degree.

Nine graduates have plans to join the military this year. In 2023, 13 graduates — 4% of the county's total graduates — planned to join the military.

The number of students attending a four-year college, however, is actually one more than indicated above. One graduate from Southern Wells is going

to college and is enlisting in the military. The News-Banner counted him once and included him in the military group.

Approximately 114 graduates — 30% — plan to enter the work force, fill their time with something else, or are still undecided about their post-secondary plans. Last year, 87 graduates — 24% of the county's total graduates — said they would enter the work force or fill their time doing something else.

Overall, the 2024 graduates' plans are similar to what their peers from previous classes said they would do after graduation, according to News-Banner reporting. Between 70% and 80% of graduates from Wells County's public high schools have indicated since 2013 that they would attend college after graduation.

Sixty-seven percent of this year's graduates say they are college bound.

Across the state, 53% of the Indiana class of 2022 went to college right after graduation, according to an article that appeared in Chalkbeat Indiana. The data runs about two years behind; the article noted. ♦

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