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AREA HOME AND

MAGAZINE

Heroes

Emilee Nottestad
Sparta's Chief of Police

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Pictured on cover and above: Emilee Nottestad, Sparta Chief of Police. Photos by Jordana Snyder Photography.

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| FROM THE EDITOR |

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Three months ago, the world was a very different place. One Thursday in February, we spent a perfectly normal afternoon gathering merchandise from local shops and fitting models for our Retail Therapy story. We spent a couple of busy hours dressing, primping, posing and shooting for a “Spring Fashion Forecast.” At the end, I tried to fix my bangs before sitting for my editor’s photo. Our April/May issue, themed “Heroes,” was just about a wrap.

Two weeks later, everything changed. Colleges were closed and students were sent home. Events were canceled through March, then April. Then the schools closed, employees had to work from home and life as we knew it was turned upside down.

Our April/May issue followed a similar pattern. At first, we didn’t think anything would change—our staff can easily work from home. Then our Community Calendar shrank till it disappeared. Stories featuring events and now-closed businesses had to be reworked. Then our distribution points closed, one by one. Our magazine production, which normally runs like clockwork, was turned upside down.

We have a saying at *Coulee Region Women* that has always served us well: When in doubt, hit “pause.” And so we did. Crossing our fingers that the world would look different in a month or two, we set aside the issue formerly known as April/May and made plans to release it as June/July in a hopefully healed world.

Then, like you, we turned inward. We stayed close to our families, shared inspiration and generally laid low. We shepherded children

through their studies, took care of our loved ones, caught up on projects—and never once lost sight of the plan to be back on the stands before long.

The “Heroes” issue you now hold is proof that *Coulee Region Women* is—and has always been—here for our community. We’ve always been grateful to our readers, our advertisers and our talented sales and creative teams who ensure that each issue comes out, like clockwork, every time. But now, that gratitude is even more deeply and broadly felt, accompanied by amazement at how women step up to support our community.

Our heroines range from mask-making sewists to teachers who—on extremely short notice—transformed classrooms into distance learning. They are the health professionals who care for those who are sick and protect others from illness. They provide meals to schoolchildren and the hungry. They are grocery-store workers and restaurateurs. They are businesswomen who found canny ways to keep customers engaged, and they are everyone who asked us, “You are still publishing June/July, right?”

They are the mental health workers who assured us it was normal to feel overwhelmed, anxious and completely lost during this time. They are the bosses and co-workers who showed us grace when we had hard days. And they are everyone who assured us that together we would get through this, however and whenever that may be.

Three months ago, the world was a very different place, and for all we’ve been through—and have yet to go through—we are taking change in stride. The bangs I have always struggled with have grown out now. My new office mates very much keep me on my toes. But all in all, we’re so thankful to be here, and to have you—our community—with us, too.



Betty

coulee region women

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THE FACE OF LEADERSHIP

Especially in the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, when our community was hungry for information and in great need of comfort and reassurance, we found it in the calm, collected and careful presence of Jennifer Rombalski, the director of the La Crosse County Health Department, and her public health staff. First every day—now twice weekly—Rombalski has addressed the public in a livestreamed address during which she has delivered accurate, current information, dispelled myths, offered encouragement and fielded question after question in a quick, clear and respectful manner. She has regularly invited physicians, mental health experts and other community health specialists to share their expertise. She—and all county staff engaged in this vital public health service—are heroes to us all.



SHILLING STEPPING DOWN

After 20 years of serving the state as an elected official, Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling has announced she will not seek reelection this year. Shilling, originally of Oshkosh, was first elected to the La Crosse County Board in 1990, before graduating from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in 1992. She began serving as a state representative in 2000, then joined the state senate in 2011, where she represented the Coulee Region counties of La Crosse, Vernon and Crawford in the 32nd District. Famous for her “Chex Mix diplomacy” and her ability to work with adversaries, Shilling says it is time now to put her family first. “I do not leave with regrets,” she said in a statement, “I leave with wonder . . . about what lies ahead, and a wonder of new ways that I will continue to be able to serve my community, and others.”



SMITH STEPPING UP

This April, Onalaska residents elected Kim Smith as mayor, the first woman to hold that office in Onalaska. Smith has been serving as interim mayor since December, when then-mayor Joe Chilsen resigned and she was appointed to take his place. An Onalaska native, Smith has been involved in city government and public service for over 20 years, serving on the parks board as well as a city alderperson. “My priority has focused on our community and successfully meeting the challenge this health crisis has presented,” she says. “Every day, I see people finding new ways to help their neighbors. Together, we will overcome the challenge of getting families and businesses back to work.”



BRAVE NEW BUSINESSWOMEN

Starting a business is always a risky endeavor—but starting one during a business closure takes a particular blend of creativity and courage. Two local women possess that blend and have fearlessly opened new businesses despite—and even embracing—this strange new business world.



Jen Barney,
Meringue Bakery



Alexandra Veglahn,
Birdy's Bookstore

Nationally renowned baker **Jen Barney** took her **Meringue Bakery** to a new level by opening a storefront on Main Street in La Crosse in April. At her new location, she offers a delectable variety of baked treats, which customers can order through her website, www.meringuecakes.com, for pickup or curbside delivery. “We are here for you and your sweet tooth,” she says. Find Meringue Bakery on Facebook for weekly offerings, holiday specials and

mouthwatering photos of exquisite sweets.

If you've read through your personal library during the shutdown, fear not. A new local independent book shop, **Birdy's Bookstore**, is here to serve you. **Alexandra Veglahn** runs Birdy's online at this time, with intentions to open a storefront in Holmen in the future. Veglahn seeks to highlight small publishers, women authors and Midwest authors, and she offers a wide selection of titles comprising fiction and nonfiction, young adult and children's books, and genres from fantasy to faith. Shop now at www.birdysbookstore.com and find it on Facebook.

Parents and teachers across the Coulee Region have rearranged lives and lesson plans to maintain children's education, but a crucial



Opal Tulpo, lunch
lady at Emerson
Elementary

casualty of the school closures has been lunch for children across the region. Never fear, the Lunch Lady Army of the La Crosse School District is here. Each morning since the closure, school cafeteria workers have assembled at schools to prepare cold breakfast and lunch

combinations that are then loaded onto Go Rite way school buses and delivered to over 30 locations around La Crosse. Each day, these lunches are offered free to any child under 18, offering nutrition for children and a welcome break from lunch-making for parents. To find the school lunch location nearest you, go to www.lacrosseschools.org.

If you live in a community outside of La Crosse, check lunch availability through your school district. Heroic cafeteria workers in many area school districts are providing lunches, too.

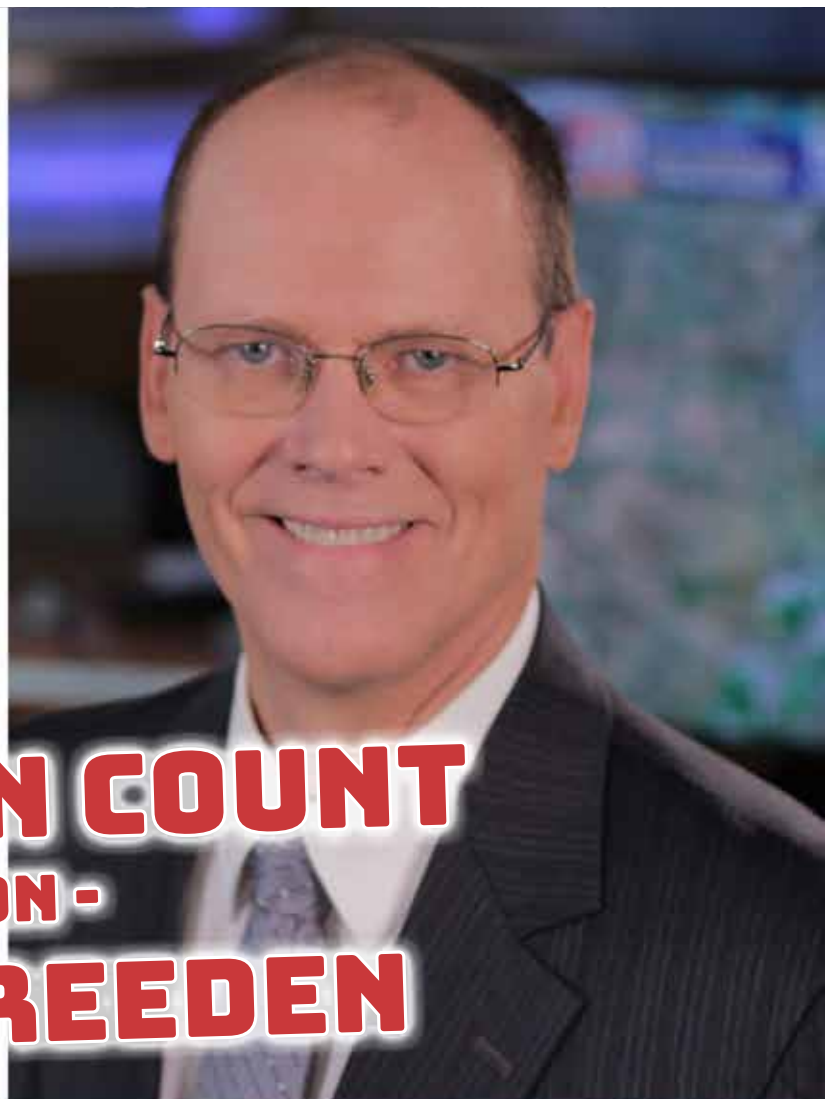
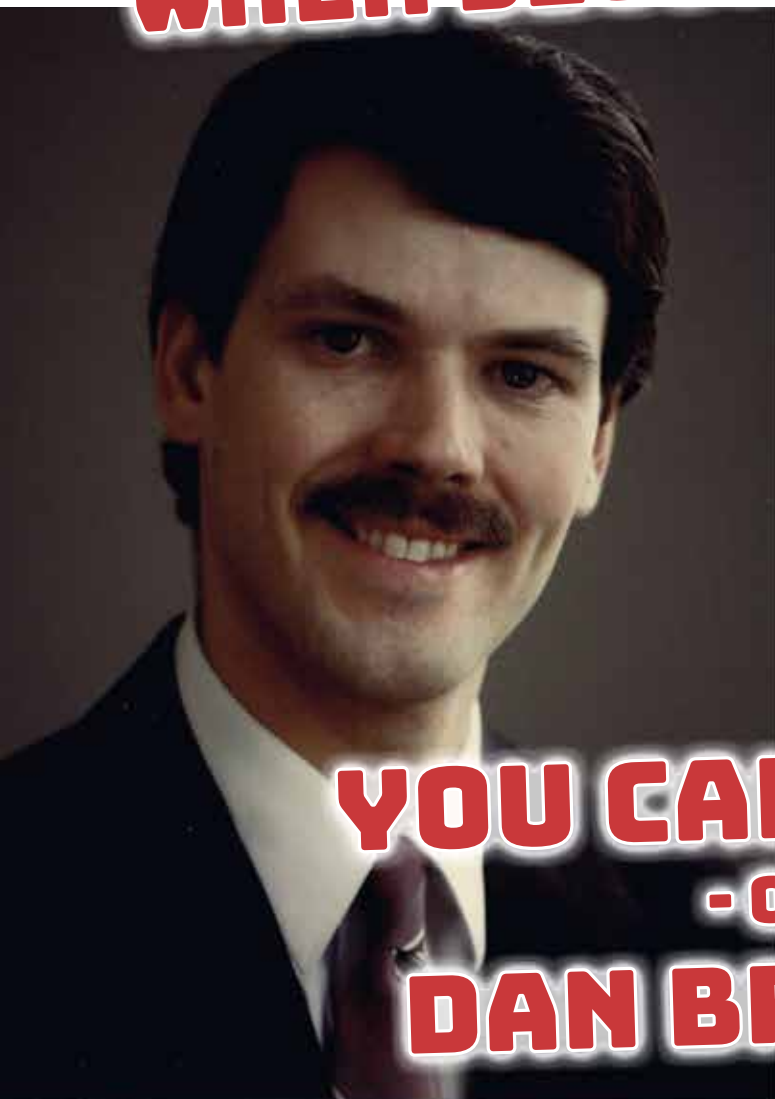
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Chief of Police Emilee Nottestad heads a department that comprises a strong team of officers; here, she is pictured with (from left) officers Jenna Lee, Ethan Schroeder and Brian James.

HOMETOWN HEROINE

Emilee Nottestad steps up as Sparta Chief of Police.

BY MARTHA KEEFFE

Photos by Jordana Snyder Photography

Sometimes you can't fight what's meant to be.

"When I was a little kid, I thought a lot about going into law enforcement," says Emilee Nottestad, Chief of Police for the Sparta Police Department and the first woman in the Coulee Region to hold that position. "But my dad was in law enforcement, and he was less than thrilled with the idea."

Resigned to go to college to study "something else," Nottestad, a University of Wisconsin-La Crosse grad, soon became restless with the direction her life was taking. "I was pre-med, and after a few years, I couldn't imagine staying in that field," says Nottestad, who admits that she craves variety and has a hard time sitting still. "So when it came time to fulfill an internship requirement for school, I looked for anything that would give me a change, that wasn't so routine. And there it was—an internship at the police academy in Sparta."

A perfect fit

"The moment I began training, I knew that this was where I was meant to be," Nottestad says, recalling how everything about the environment at the academy was a perfect fit. "From shooting, to emergency vehicle driving, to learning all the laws—just everything—it all sucked me right in."

Energized by her newfound career path, Nottestad entered the academy at the Public Safety Training Facility located near Sparta, where she completed her law enforcement training as an intern between her junior and senior year at UW-La Crosse. Without wasting time, Nottestad put her internship experience and skills to use. Not only did she work part time for the UW-La Crosse Police Department, but she also picked up a part-time job at the Viroqua Police Department, where she would continue to work in the future. In addition, she was motivated by the fact that officers are given the option to select specialized areas of training such as detective, canine unit, school resource and CTU (combined tactical unit).

"Having that specialized training keeps it interesting and allows your job to be flexible," she says. "During my career, I've worked as a night shift sergeant—which was my favorite assignment—in the schools with the D.A.R.E. program, and have done patrol and investigations," says Nottestad, noting that each specialty fit well for a particular point in her life. "For example, when my kids were younger, I worked in the schools, and as our lives changed, I moved on to something else. I was always in the right place at the right time."



Left: Chief of Police Nottestad supervises 22 sworn officers and three civilian employees in the Sparta Police Department. Photo by The Studio. Top right: Part of Nottestad's job is maintaining the already-positive relationship the police department has with the community. Bottom right: Nottestad was sworn in as Chief of Police on January 11, 2020.

Communication and community

Sworn in as a full-time patrol officer for Vernon County, Nottestad worked in the jail, in the dispatch center and on patrol. She stayed on in Vernon County for two-and-a-half years before she joined the Viroqua Police Department, where she worked for about 15 years. There, Nottestad was promoted to sergeant, where she assumed the role of liaison between upper management and patrol. In 2015 Nottestad was hired by the Sparta Police Department as a lieutenant. There, she took on the responsibility of supervising the department, planning work schedules, assisting with detective work and, if needed, conducting internal investigations. Recognizing her abilities to lead and train her fellow officers, as well as to clearly communicate information, the department promoted Nottestad to deputy chief in 2019. Nottestad, who also holds a master's degree in education and teaches at the police academy, says, "Being able to communicate information and plan ahead is essential in this job."

Those skills have transferred well into her new job as Sparta Chief of Police, a position that she was sworn into on January 11 of this year. "When I came on board, the police department already had a good relationship with the community," says Nottestad. "In our department, we have 22 sworn officers and three civilian employees, and a big part of my job is to make sure the right people are being developed for the right position in the future. But it's just as important to build and keep good communication between the police and the community."

Nottestad is quick to acknowledge how well the people in the department work together and extend that sense of cooperation out into the community. "When you look at it from the standpoint of the police, Sparta is an extremely busy place," says Nottestad. "It's amazing how things go so smoothly within the department. We're a tight-knit group of people—we're our own social group, kind of our second family—and I think that carries over into our presence in the community."

A new face

And, now with Nottestad as the new face of the police department, has the fact that she is a woman in a role traditionally occupied by a man had an effect on the community?

"I think the perception has changed a lot since I was first began working in law enforcement," laughs Nottestad, referring to an incident she had where an older resident preferred to have a man handle the situation. "I also remember being asked if I had any children, or if my work hours affected my family. However, my husband, who was also in law enforcement, was never asked those questions."

"Now, I don't really think that people have a problem with women police officers," she says, even though, according to the Wisconsin Department of Justice, only 18 percent of the state's law enforcement is composed of women. "And if there is, I've never really seen it. I've always just been one of the guys," says Nottestad.

Preserving the positive

Looking forward, Nottestad hopes to find ways to encourage more young people to consider law enforcement as a career. "The police have taken a big hit in the past few years, but I hope to see more people deciding to enter the academy. Departments throughout the state are always looking for qualified candidates, and I know there are others out there who are well suited to the job," she says. "You won't get rich, you won't get a lot of recognition, and you've got to be ready for hours that bounce around a lot, but even with that, it is very rewarding."

Nottestad hopes that she can preserve the positive image that the Sparta Police Department has worked hard to establish within the community. "I have seen some of the absolute worst behavior from people, but I've also seen some of the best in humanity," she says, when asked how people respond to the police doing their job. "When we need them, people in this community really pull together." (crw)

Martha Keefe lives and writes in La Crosse. She thanks all those who work to keep our communities safe.

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Sergeant Rylie McCracken has served the Wisconsin National Guard in Kuwait and Iraq, and now serves in La Crosse as a National Guard recruiter. She met her husband, Ryan, at the 147th National Guard battalion in Madison.

A HIGHER STANDARD

Women in the National Guard serve our country at home and abroad.

BY LEAH CALL
Contributed photos

Veterans and current military service men and women are without a doubt heroes among us. One of those individuals deserving recognition is Coulee Region woman Rylie McCracken, a sergeant in the National Guard.

"I feel proud putting on the uniform every day," says McCracken. "Being in the Guard, or really any branch, you hold yourself to a higher standard. You don't really represent yourself anymore, you represent the National Guard."

A military family

For McCracken, who grew up in Poynette, Wisconsin, the 147th National Guard battalion in Madison felt like home. That's because she spent a lot of her childhood hanging around the armory where her

father and grandfather both served as pilots in the National Guard.

"I thought, one day my dad would retire, and I wouldn't be able to just walk into that armory anymore," recalls McCracken. "So my best friend and I joined the Guard my senior year in high school. My dad and grandpa actually got to swear us in, which was really cool."

McCracken, an aviation operation specialist, later met her husband, Ryan, at the 147th. Ryan's specialty was refueling aircraft. The couple married in 2017 and both were deployed to Kuwait one month later. "He ended up going to Jordan, and I went to Al-Asad, Iraq, for a bit. He was refueling and I was running medivac," explains McCracken.

As an aviation operator, McCracken kept track of aircraft and pilots through radio communications. "If an aircraft goes down, we are the ones back on home base that get help out there."

Serving in the Middle East

Having spent three months in Kuwait and three months in Iraq, McCracken's impression of the region is hot—*really hot*. “I remember getting off the plane, and we felt the exhaust coming off the plane. But as we walked further and further away, we realized it was not the exhaust; it was the wind. It literally feels like a blow dryer on ‘hot’ to your face.”

With temperatures regularly reaching 120 degrees, a 100-degree day felt balmy. “And then in Al-Asad, there was just nothing,” adds McCracken. “You look out, and there is just sand for miles and miles.”

McCracken says she was always treated equally as a woman in the military and truly bonded with those who served with her. “Nowadays, it’s not that out of the ordinary to be a woman in the military, which I think is awesome.”

That sense of equality was a stark contrast from what she observed in Kuwait and Iraq. Life there is different, especially for women, she says. “When they go to town, their faces are covered, and their roles and freedoms are different from ours. That made me thankful to be from the United States.”

Knowing that she was helping those people have a better life gives McCracken a sense of pride. “We were helping demolish ISIS. It was cool to be part of that, to feel that we are helping that country, helping those people.”

Building confidence, self-esteem

The McCrackens returned to Wisconsin in January 2018 after seven months in the Middle East. In March of the following year, Rylie

McCracken became a full-time National Guard recruiter, working out of an office on West Avenue near the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse campus.

She recommends the National Guard as a good opportunity for young women. Most start out with a part-time commitment with opportunities for full-time orders. The Guard teaches individuals to be leaders. In exchange for their service, Guard members receive funds to pay for college, an attractive benefit in this day of soaring college costs. But McCracken knows the Guard can do much more. “Some young women, especially girls in high school, lack self-esteem, lack confidence. The guard definitely will give you that confidence, especially when you come back from basic training. Basic training can be challenging, but you learn to speak up and be confident.”

Pregnant with their first child—a son due in May—McCracken and her husband now live in Coon Valley. Ryan McCracken is still in the Guard but works full-time building houses. The couple like being part of a close-knit community and have become active in the Coon Valley American Legion. And while McCracken doesn't think of herself as a hero, she is proud of the experiences she's had through the National Guard.

“When I was in aviation, I felt proud keeping our pilots safe. Now as a recruiter, I think about how much the Guard has done for me and my family—and being able to help someone else start that chapter means a lot to me.” **(crw)**

Westby-based writer Leah Call is thankful for the men and women who serve or have served to protect our freedoms.



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HEROES & HOMES

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Foster parents open their homes and their hearts to kids and families in crisis.

BY SHARI HEGLAND

Contributed photos



“It’s hard. But I would never want to not do it.”

Three heads nod as Jess Burks describes being a foster parent. These four women understand well the challenges and rewards of taking in a child—or an entire family—as your own for a few days, weeks, months—or a lifetime.

Burks and her husband became licensed foster parents in La Crosse County three years ago after struggling with infertility. They have since experienced both short- and long-term placements and have adopted two children who entered their home through foster care, with a third adoption nearly complete.

Alison Robinson and her husband have five biological children and thought, “We can always set one more place at the table.” That “one more place” is currently occupied by three siblings under 5.

Ami Burghagen’s own children are grown, but she and her husband didn’t have any children together, so they began fostering. “If I had known about this, I would have started 15 years ago,” she says.

Penny Stock, a grandmother of nine who also cares for an adult son with Down syndrome, was herself in foster care in her teens. “When you get foster parents who change the course of your life, it’s amazing,” she says.

“I’m not giving up on you”

All four women acknowledge that being a foster

parent is not easy. The challenges they face range from caring for a baby born addicted to heroin to tracking down a runaway teenager struggling with addiction. It can mean frequent medical and counseling appointments, driving cross-county to access resources or transporting children to a different school district so they can maintain a connection when their foster home is in a different town.

Foster parents take classes—through the county and on their own—to understand how trauma impacts children. “I had to put myself into that situation to learn what (my foster daughter) is going through,” Stock says. “I always tell her, ‘I’m not giving up on you.’”

They coordinate closely with schools to help students catch up when they have moved too much or are failing classes. And coordinating visitation with parents often includes informal education for those parents about everything from nutrition and how to give medications to how to clean up a toddler after a meal.

Most do all of this around their own full-time jobs, sometimes taking FMLA leave for special situations such as caring for a newborn.

Reuniting families

Lila Barlow, assistant manager with La Crosse County Department of Human Services, calls

Left: The Robinsons have five biological children, yet there’s always room at the table for one—or three—more.

Right: Some foster children—like two the Burkses have taken in—become adopted by their foster parents.

Foster Parenting in La Crosse County

- There are currently 114 licensed foster homes in the county, including 37 relative caregivers, down from 140 homes 10 years ago.
- In 2019, an average of 150 children from newborn to 17 were in out-of-home care at any one time; 106 of those were in foster care.
- Learn more about becoming a foster parent at <http://lacrossecounty.org/humanservices/childrenAndYouthServices.asp#foster>.



Jess Burks and her husband have adopted two of their foster children.

foster parents the “glue” of the county’s foster care system. Not only are they heroes for the children, but also for the families of those children, she says.

While there are situations like the Burkses’, where adoption is ideal, the goal for most children placed in foster care is to be reunited with their biological family, after changes are made so that situation is safe. Burks saw that success with the first sibling group placed in her care. “Those parents worked so hard, and I really was proud of them, to see the kids get to go home,” she says. She also works to keep her adopted children in contact with their biological families. “It’s an important connection,” she says. “It’s a part of who they are.”

When the kids do go home, they often take a little bit of their foster family with them. In Burghagen’s case, it is a photo album, so they can show their biological family the things they experienced. A bit of each foster child stays with Burghagen, too. “Their pictures are right beside my own kids’ pictures on the wall,” she says. “They are my kids.”

A different type of love

Despite the challenges of foster parenting, there are intangible payoffs. “You can’t quantify it,” Robinson says. “You can’t put a price on what I am doing.”

Burghagen says her former charges’ families sometimes ask her for a weekend of care because they trust her so much, and she

remembers seeing the delight of a 13-year-old experiencing a real Christmas for the first time. Those moments help make up for the challenges.

“We give up a lot, but it’s a choice we make, and we make it for good reasons,” Stock says, pointing out how “her kids” remind her of the family rule to always say goodbye with a hug in the morning. “It’s a different type of love,” she says. “I have my kids’ love and my grandkids’ love, but then you have these foster kids holding you.”

“I have friends who say they couldn’t do it because they would get too attached,” Burks says. “You *have* to get attached. If you aren’t, you are doing that child a disservice.”

Stock agrees. “It’s all about your heart and making a difference in somebody’s life.” **(crw)**

Shari Hegland, mother of one teenager, hopes she has done justice to the commitment and love these foster parents share to make a difference in the lives of children and families in our community.

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LIFE GOES ON

Live organ donors offer life and hope, often to people they don't even know.

BY JANIS JOLLY
Contributed photos



A match of fate: Amy Prince (center left) heard of a kidney donation need by Stefani (center right), a mutual fan of the band O-Town, and felt compelled to help.

Two young women from the Coulee Region made the brave decision to donate a kidney—not to a family member, but to a stranger. Their stories are different, but the women have important common experiences. Both felt “called” to help, and both became advocates for live organ donations.

Live organ what?

One day in 2003, Vanessa Waldera was chatting with co-workers about live organ donation—where a donor parts with an organ they can survive without, like a kidney or part of a liver, to help someone else. Waldera didn't know anything about live organ donation at the time: “That's pretty weird,” she thought. Not a week later, her friend Lisa said that her boyfriend's mother was ill and needed a kidney,



Vanessa Waldera generously donated a kidney to an acquaintance; now, she's an advocate for live organ donation.

but no family members were accepted as donors. When Waldera learned the woman had type A positive blood, she spontaneously responded, “I'm A positive,” and offered to be tested to see if she could be a donor.

Waldera, who lives in the small city of Whitehall, Wisconsin, knew who the woman was but didn't know her personally. So why volunteer to make such a sacrifice? “I have two kidneys; she needed one, so why not?” Waldera says.

Waldera was contacted by a “kidney coordinator” from Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, who confirmed her

blood type and asked her to send in a blood sample to see if its makeup matched the recipient's.

Circumstances align

Waldera believes that if something is meant to happen, circumstances will align so that it will happen. “I gave it to God and knew if it wasn't what he wanted me to do, something would stop it,” she said. She was a match.

After that, she was confident that this was the right decision. “People are put in your life for a purpose,” she says. Donating a kidney to this woman was her purpose, she believes.

Single at the time, Waldera looked to her parents for support. Her father enthusiastically approved, even offering to donate in her place.

Kidney transplant surgery has been refined to be a minimally invasive procedure. According to Mayo Clinic Health System, “When donating a kidney, donors undergo laparoscopic surgery—a procedure that involves making a few small incisions instead of a larger one. This type of surgery reduces recovery time.” The laparoscopic procedure involves a horizontal incision in the lower abdomen and two small “camera” incisions higher and on the side. The kidney is harvested using a camera and a special tool, then pulled out through the abdominal opening. All the implements must be threaded around the other organs.

Waldera says she experienced little pain, but when she first tried to sit up after the surgery, she couldn't do it because of the incision in her lower abdomen. “You really depend on those core muscles to sit up or get up,” she says. After a few more tries with help from the nurses, she was able to get up and walk around.



Amy Prince donated a kidney to a woman she had never met.

She spent the first week of recovery at her friend Lisa's home, and she was soon walking a couple miles a day. She never had to take FMLA leave from work. Her youth, physical fitness and good health sped her recovery.

Though she didn't know the recipient, Madeleine, very well before the surgery, they developed a friendship afterward. When they ran into each other, Madeleine would tell Waldera how well the kidney was doing.

Since the operation, Waldera continues to participate in Mayo's follow-up research of kidney donors. She acts as an advocate

for live donation by sharing her story with anyone who is thinking about doing the same. And she keeps physically active, working out nearly every day.

Denial and determination

Like Vanessa, Amy Prince of Holmen had no previous knowledge or experience with live organ donation.

Her awakening resulted from her interest in the '90s boy band O-Town, which she followed on social media. "O-Town was big when I was in high school, and when they came together again in 2014, I visited their Facebook page." In 2016, O-Town tweeted that their loyal fan Stefani needed a kidney transplant. The band published her blood type and asked for help.

When Prince realized she had the matching blood type, she felt

compelled to contact Stefani. Her husband and parents thought it was OK, so she offered to be tested.

Her initial testing was done at Mayo Clinic Health System in La Crosse, although the surgery had to be done in Stefani's hometown of Philadelphia. The test results were promising, and the Philadelphia hospital asked Prince to come and meet the transplant team, although a CT scan was still needed. However, the results of this test uncovered a serious roadblock: a tumor on Prince's back. She went back to La Crosse to have the tumor removed. It was benign, but the Philadelphia hospital denied her as a donor in fall 2017.

The denial added fuel to Prince's determination to donate. She contacted a different Philadelphia hospital, which approved her after seeing all her test results. By spring 2018, a new date was set.

The donation procedure was a major commitment for Prince, who had two children and a husband back in Wisconsin. She had to remain in Philadelphia for five weeks for post-op procedures even though the surgery only required a couple of days in the hospital.

Prince chose to have a vertical incision in her abdomen instead of a horizontal one; otherwise the operation was the same as Waldera's. To keep friends and family informed, she created a Facebook page called Bye Bye Bean. She later made the page public to advocate for live organ donation, answering questions and sharing her story with those who are thinking about it.

She remains in contact with Stefani and the band members, who flew Prince back to Philadelphia for a special concert where they called Prince and Stefani on stage and told the story of the kidney transplant that happened because of a band, aided by social media. *(crw)*

Janis Jolly is a freelance writer living in La Crosse.

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A Gem in the Valley



A home's redesign makes it glow even brighter.

BY HEIDI OVERSON
Photos by Atypik Studio

Emerald Valley is truly one of the jewels of the Coulee Region. It's not far from the hustle and bustle of the Onalaska marketplace, but once one enters the valley, peace pervades. Emerald Valley residents enjoy open green space and gorgeous nature. Rick and Janell Stewart are no exception. Their home on Augusta Lane sits farther back in the valley, and they appreciate the convenience of living close to a city while still enjoying the countryside.

The house is everything one would imagine a newer, larger home would be, but in 2017, the Stewarts decided to

A light palette of modern colors refreshes the rooms of this Emerald Valley home.



Peaceful, bright and cheery: the Stewart redesign resulted in a home that is all of these things.

do some interior redesigning. They were referred to J Company in La Crosse, and that's when the magic began.

A company with heart

J Company Interior Design Studio is owned by Mark Halter, and he and his designers have 35 years of design experience. Two designers, Janelle Byus and Kristin Boetcher, were thrilled to start the Stewart home's redesign.

"Signature design is our goal," says Byus. "We form a warm, intuitive relationship with our clients to ensure we completely understand their wants and needs."

The redesign process is undertaken carefully, right from the start. The Stewart redesign has been a work in progress since 2017. The Stewarts desired to do away with the darker colors in their rooms, and the designers suggested implementing what's currently trending in home design: clean, neutral and earthtone colors, as well as decluttered spaces. The result so far: a much brighter home that looks refreshed yet still retains a cozy, welcoming feel.

Redesigning room by room

Byus and Boetcher redesigned almost all of the rooms on the main floor and three bedrooms on the top level. Walking into the home, one is greeted by a large, open foyer with a beautiful handwoven rug and pleasant lighting and cheer. The main living room is straight ahead, with cozy furniture done in neutral tones, accent pillows and ambience-creating lighting, all of which equates to a great place to sit down and have a good conversation or just relax. One can see how the decluttering concept plays in; the room looks clean and elegant, with no distractions or clutter. It adds to the peaceful aura of the room.

Redesigning the main-level craft room was important to Janell Stewart, as she spends a lot of time there. This large room is a showpiece now, with Kate Spade wallpaper and curtain trim. Cupboards, drawers and shelving provide all the storage for Stewart's many projects.

The formal dining room was redesigned, too, again to brighten the area but emphasize elegance. Original cabinets and other dining-room pieces remain but fit in perfectly with the new décor and accents.

The master bedroom's redesign resulted in a room that is peaceful, brighter and cheery. The window treatments were updated here as well. The large, sunny den was redesigned with gray carpet and black accent pieces, such as chairs and lamps. The dark-wood cabinetry adds to the stateliness of the room; it's the perfect place to get business done.


A room Martha Stewart would die for

The kitchen boasts ample space, and wooden cabinets and shelves surround a large island. The vaulted ceilings add to the majesty of this culinary paradise. Large windows look out over the backyard patio, where the family can barbeque, relax and play. The backyard blends into a wooded hillside, which adds to the specialness of this home's location.

Making interior design unique

The J Company designers pride themselves on what they offer their clients, who are located not only in the Coulee Region but throughout the state and nation. Their offerings, such as flooring, window treatments, tiling, décor, lighting and furniture, are not items one can commonly find in stores—they're specially designed and ordered. Their seamstress creates the window treatments, and furniture is upholstered or reupholstered in the company's building. Rugs are hand woven and unique to each project. Local suppliers, such as Wisconsin Building Supply, place orders for them.

"We offer a wide variety of things. We work very hard to design and customize uniquely to every client," says Byus. "Special attention is given to their desires—from the drapes to every accent pillow and rug. Our goal is for the final result to be pleasing in every possible way."

"Helping the Stewarts has been a great experience," says Boetcher. "We've immensely enjoyed assisting them with their redesign." 

Heidi Overson writes for fun and (some) profit. Follow her @writerheidi or at createsegue.com.



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The Twin Comforts of Hospitality and Ramen

The Fat Porcupine Noodle Bar is a restaurant for community and the individual.

BY TALLITHA REESE

Contributed photos

The parable of the porcupine tells of a group of the prickly creatures who attempt to huddle together for warmth during a cold winter. However, their quills prick each other, making the closeness uncomfortable. Yet when the animals move apart, they begin to freeze, and so they must work to find the perfect spot that provides enough of the life-giving warmth from close companionship while still having enough space to themselves.

This story inspired the name and atmosphere of La Crosse's new noodle bar: Fat Porcupine, a place where people can feel safe and inspired to be entirely themselves, yet which also provides the backdrop for memorable experiences with friends and family. Even in the midst of a pandemic, the owners have proved this to be true.

"We believe that warm hospitality and genuine human connection have the power to change someone's day," says Brie Roland, one of the restaurant's four owners. "Ultimately, we believe that it's better to be together, and that a fat porcupine is a porcupine with friends."

Out-of-this-world comfort food sourced locally

The design of the noodle bar, which opened in early December 2019, is also inspired by the owners' recognition that several sci-fi movies and shows feature a scene where a main character will randomly sit down to a bowl of ramen: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Altered Carbon* and *Blade Runner*, to name a few.

"Even in the midst of a post-apocalyptic cyberpunk hellscape, a

bowl of ramen can somehow still fill a void. It's the ultimate comfort food," explains Roland. And while customers wait for the day they can mingle again in the *Blade Runner*-inspired dining space, that bowl of comfort is seamlessly delivered through curbside pickup service.

Though the menu of Fat Porcupine is small, due to the tiny kitchen, it packs a punch with flavor, provided largely by local, organic ingredients.

"This can be challenging because restaurants already operate on such slim margins, and local and organic foods can often be more expensive than sourcing food produced on a mass scale—and for good reason," says Roland. "But we take that risk because we firmly believe that it's better for the community, and the quality and freshness shows in the dishes we make."

Fat Porcupine currently sources ingredients from Hidden Stream in Elgin, Minnesota; Driftless Organics; a local Amish farmer; Organic Valley; Deep Rooted; and various tiny sustainable farms throughout the area.

Even with the small menu, variation comes from the availability of seasonal ingredients and the creative whims of the team.

Inspired by beauty and business potential

Fat Porcupine is owned by two couples: Roland and her husband, Dustin Thompson, as well as Peter Beard and Zoa Ryan, all of whom are originally from the Twin Cities and have worked in the food

service industry for most of their careers.

Roland, Thompson and Beard all met while working together at a small indie restaurant in Minneapolis and went on to work at many other restaurants together. Beard eventually met Ryan through another job, and through the years, the four became very close friends and discovered that they worked extremely well together.

Over a year ago, Roland and Thompson were on the hunt for a new adventure after selling their home and leaving their longtime roles as general manager/wine director and chef de cuisine at St. Genevieve in South Minneapolis. They had always talked about opening their own restaurant but couldn't find a space in the Twin Cities that seemed to suit.

Then a friend and fellow chef—Jorge Guzman, who had previously moved to the La Crosse area—described the beauty of the location and its potential for business growth.

They were intrigued, and after a visit to the area, they knew that it was perfect. The couple also recognized that many of the organic and small farms in the region were ones they had worked with in the past, so that was another draw. When they shared their plans with Beard and Ryan, their friends decided to join them.

True hospitality

"If you come to our restaurant, it is with utmost certainty that you are being served by an owner," explains Roland. "This isn't a forever thing, but it was really important for us to get off on the right foot and help guide our staff in the kind of hospitality we strive to provide."

Thompson, who has been cooking professionally since he was 18, serves as Fat Porcupine's chef and is the driving force in culinary creativity.


Roland is the general manager of the restaurant and focuses her efforts on human resources and staff development and acts as community liaison and spokesperson. Creatively, she also has a hand in the bar program and designs and executes the dessert program with Thompson.

Ryan studied art, design and marketing and has been focusing on those aspects. She worked on the logo, website and menus, and she has a vast amount of experience behind the bar.

Beard takes care of a lot of the administrative work, makes the wine, beer and spirits purchases and helps with the crafting of the bar program as well.

Fat Porcupine opened to a strong start back in December, inviting diners into its cozy space on a first-come, first-serve basis. When the Covid-19 threat made that impossible, the owners shifted to takeout service, which has since evolved into a weekend take-and-make offering (see Fat Porcupine's Facebook page for ordering details). The restrictions haven't dampened their creativity; the restaurant hosted a social distancing Oyster Challenge, complete with oysters on ice in May. And ever supportive of its community, Fat Porcupine has even provided lunches to emergency child care workers at the La Crosse YMCA.

The team at Fat Porcupine has lots of ideas and hopes for the future. But today is devoted to serving their customers the comfort food they need while sustaining local and independent producers—their commitment to community fueling it all.



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The Art and Science of Food and Wine Pairing

Wine and food pairing can be considered an art, but much of it is based on science. For example, a heavy wine like Cabernet Sauvignon would be delicious with a grilled filet mignon, where a lighter-bodied wine, such as Pinot Grigio, would be overwhelmed by the heavy flavor of the beef. A light fare of chicken noodle soup might pair well with a lightly oaked Chardonnay.

Sweetness levels of foods can hint at what wine might pair. With dessert, try matching the sweetness level of the wine. Or try contrasting the wine to the dessert: think Champagne with strawberries.

With appetizers, which can be varied in type and flavor, try a dry rosé. Rosé is a versatile wine that is a combination of red and white, or made from red grapes without much influence of the skin and seeds. Rosé wines are nice as a "go-to" as they have characteristics of both types of wines.

Trying wines with dishes is the best way to know if the food can make the wine "sing." Practice your pairings before that special dinner, if possible. After you've tried a few pairings, you will naturally feel comfortable adventuring on your own!

Lynita Docken-Delaney
Winemaker, Elmaro Vineyard

SHRIMP AND PORK POTSTICKERS

with **Ginger and Scallion Vinaigrette**

Makes about 30 dumplings

For the Potstickers:

- 1 lb. freshly ground pork
- 1 lb. peeled and deveined shrimp
- 1 tsp. salt
- 3 tsp. fish sauce
- 2 tsp. sesame oil
- 2 tsp. fresh minced ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 scallions, sliced thin, using the whites and the greens
- 4 tsp. dry sake (or mirin or other dry white wine)
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1 package gyoza wrappers, thawed

Combine all the ingredients except for the gyoza wrappers and mix well. In a food processor, blend the mixture together in batches until semi-smooth and fluffy, ensuring all the seasonings are evenly distributed.

Lay out 6 wrappers, and keep the remaining wrappers covered under a damp towel. Working one at a time, place a generous spoonful into the middle of a wrapper, gently wet the edge of the wrapper and fold it shut, creating a plump half moon. If you wish, crimp the edges shut by making 5 small folds around the round edge of the dumpling.



For the Ginger and Scallion Vinaigrette:

- 3 bunches of scallions, limp outer leaves peeled off
- 1 finger-length piece of ginger
- 4 T sesame oil
- 2 T canola or grapeseed oil
- 2 T tamari
- 2 T sherry vinegar
- Sugar to taste

Mince the scallions, then peel and mince the ginger. Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl and whisk vigorously. Season to taste with sugar and a little salt if needed. If the sauce seems too thick, add more sherry vinegar.

Assembly:

Line a bamboo steamer basket with cabbage leaves or a round piece of wax paper with a hole cut in the middle to allow steam through. Steam the dumplings for 8 minutes, arrange on a plate or platter and top with a generous amount of the vinaigrette. If you don't have a bamboo steamer, the dumplings can also be simmered for 5-6 minutes, until they float, and then drained well in a colander.



MEET ME INCOGNITO

- 2 oz. Wheatley vodka (or your favorite vodka)
- ½ oz. Ginger-Turmeric Syrup (see recipe below)
- ½ oz. lemon juice

Build in a shaker tin with ice. Shake and strain into a lowball spirits glass. Top with ice and enjoy!

For the Ginger-Turmeric Syrup:

- 4 grams ground turmeric
- 45 grams ginger root, peeled and chopped
- 189 grams cane sugar
- 95 grams water

Measure ingredients using an electronic kitchen scale. Combine all ingredients in a medium saucepot and bring to a simmer. Keep simmering until all of the sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and let steep for as long as you like, but ideally for at least 30 minutes to incorporate the flavors. Strain the syrup through a fine mesh tea strainer and chill before using in your cocktail. (crw)

Tallitha Reese is a freelance writer and content manager based in Cashton. She owns Words By Reese and you can find out more about her and her work at www.wordsbyreese.com.

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Photo by Luann Dobb Photography

Capable Canines service dogs lend a hand—or paw.

BY JULIE NELSON
Contributed photos



Left: Eve Molzhon, founder of Capable Canines. Center: Volunteers train service dogs for socialization and appropriate behavior in public, such as at a La Crosse Loggers game. Right: Andy and Louie: a happy service dog match.

Heroes frequently go above and beyond in a superhuman way. That's certainly true of Louie, a loyal and dedicated helper, except for one thing: Louie isn't a human. Louie is a dog. A certified service dog, Louie has radically changed the life of his owner, a young man named Andy.

Andy has quadriplegia and uses a wheelchair. Since his own hands don't function effectively, he needs a working set wherever he goes. Andy employed some good caregivers for a while, and they were helpful, but they weren't always available when Andy wanted or needed to go somewhere.

Louie, on the other hand, has always been up for anything, whether that was attending college classes or now going to work with Andy out in the community. Louie opens doors, picks up dropped objects and even carries some of Andy's belongings when needed. At the store, it is Louie who gives Andy's debit card to the cashier. With Louie around, Andy is able to live more independently and feel more like a regular young adult. And, as you might imagine, Andy's parents have a lot of peace of mind knowing Louie is always available for any sticky situation Andy might get into.

A local service

While Louie, who lives in Milwaukee, is the visible star of this story, the behind-the-scenes hero is Coulee Region woman Eve Molzhon, the president and driving force of Capable Canines of Wisconsin, the organization that connected Louie with Andy.

Capable Canines trains and certifies service dogs. Different than emotional support animals, service dogs perform a service, and they must be able to provide their humans with increased independence

and improve their quality of life. Service dogs may help people like Andy reach and pick up dropped items, or they may be something steady to hold on to for a child with balance problems. Service dogs can even be trained to detect and alert someone when a person with diabetes falls into unconsciousness while they are sleeping. These dogs are *good*.

Serving up help, gratitude and joy

As puppies, the service dogs—mostly labs and other large breeds—work with trainers who take the dogs out in public as often as possible to teach socialization and appropriate behavior in every place from a grocery store to a movie theater to a funeral.

Next, the dog will live with a foster family anywhere from four months to a year. There are currently 20 people on a list waiting to receive a service dog, and Molzhon says the list would speed up if there were more people willing to be a foster parent to a dog. Food, vet services and other equipment such as leashes are paid for by Capable Canines.

Molzhon and her 8-year-old daughter have now had six foster dogs come and go. Molzhon recognizes her daughter is a better person for the experience, and she says even though giving up a pup you've come to love is never easy, it's totally worth it. "Seeing what a difference you have made in someone else's life and seeing how happy that person is, is truly amazing. As much as the other person is grateful, the amount of joy you experience is indescribable." **(CRW)**

As the Community Engagement Coordinator for Great Rivers United Way, Julie Nelson is impressed with how much a service dog can change a person's life.



Featured composer
Clara Wieck Schumann



Guest pianist
Lucille Chung

Cherish the Ladies

The La Crosse Symphony Orchestra celebrates the anniversary of women's right to vote.

BY HEIDI GRIMINGER BLANKE
Contributed photos

This June the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra (LSO) will be plucking the strings of history, honoring the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and celebrating women's musical talents in a virtual concert featuring work by composer Clara Wieck Schumann performed by renowned pianist Lucille Chung. Originally scheduled as a live performance culminating the 2019-2020 LSO season, the performance will instead debut in a live YouTube event on Friday, June 5, at 8 p.m., open to all.

Orchestrating a vote

"Wisconsin was the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote," says Eva Marie Restel, LSO executive director. "We certainly wanted to highlight that and have a way of celebrating it," and the idea for a concert titled "Cherish the Ladies" was born.

"We chose pieces that were conducted or written by women," says Restel. "There aren't that many in history, because it wasn't something women could do; it wasn't encouraged or taught." When the live performance of this concert was canceled due to Covid-19 concerns, a virtual substitute was soon in the works.

The featured composer of the YouTube event, Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896), was mainly recognized as a pianist, not as a composer, despite her accomplishments. Yet she penned numerous piano concertos as well as pieces for vocal groups and chamber groups. In the LSO video event, sponsored by Trust Point, guest artist Lucille Chung will perform a portion of Schumann's "Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 7" as well as Robert Schumann's "Fantasiestücke." An acclaimed pianist who has performed in over 30 countries, Chung is creating this video exclusively for LSO and will be doing a tribute




La Crosse Symphony
Orchestra Executive Director
Eva Marie Restel

to Wisconsin in honor of its ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Symphonic ties

Although LSO gathered its first musicians in 1898, the symphony did not have its first female conductor until Amy Mills took the position from 1995 to 2009. Today, LSO, like many orchestras around the world, features female musicians, and women composers are not uncommon. "There's a countrywide effort to make room for people who haven't had those opportunities in the past. It's great for the future of our music," says Restel.

The symphony also welcomes young people into the musical arena by offering free strings lessons to all at the local Boys & Girls Clubs. This musical exposure is especially beneficial to girls. "It gives them confidence and the ability to maximize their potential," says Restel. "And a female maximizing her potential makes a big difference in the community." 

Heidi Griminger Blanke is a frequent contributor to magazines and anthologies. She is a member of the Mississippi Valley Writers Guild and applauds and thanks musicians everywhere.

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Don't miss LSO's new YouTube programming with daily talks by conductor Alexander Platt plus links to LSO performances.



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Big Sisters, Everyday Heroes

Big Brothers Big Sisters provides caring support that can change lives.

BY JAN WELLIK
Contributed photos



"Little" Summer and her "Big," Laurie Finn, enjoy area activities and each other's company through Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region.

Being a hero can be as simple as teaching a child how to ride a bike. Heroes like Big Sister Laurie Finn are role models by being patient, being reliable and providing positive experiences for youth.

Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region matches adult mentors (Bigs) with at-risk youth 5 to 15 (Littles) in the La Crosse and Winona regions. Each youth is matched with an adult mentor, often of the same gender, to meet for one-on-one community activities and outings at least two times per month—though some matches, like Finn (Big) and Summer (Little) meet weekly for an afternoon of fun.

Kate Bickett, Community Relations Manager for Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region, said that many of the youth they serve come from single-parent households and low-income families. Currently, there are 140 matches in the 7 Rivers Region, with many volunteer mentors being women. However, about 70 to 75 youth are on a waiting list, and 90 percent of those are boys, waiting for a male mentor.

Mentors to youth

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is the oldest and largest youth mentoring organization in the United States, operating in every state.

Youth show improvement in seven outcomes areas as a result of having a mentor: parental trust, attitudes toward risky behaviors, grades, educational expectations, confidence in doing schoolwork, sense of belonging among peers and the presence of a special adult, according to the 2018 BBBSA annual report. "Being matched with a Big can help a child strengthen peer relationships, aspire to achieve more in school and improve overall parent-child relationships," the report says.

"These kids really need mentors; that's why they're here," says Bickett, who is a 2019 communications graduate from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and is responsible for event planning, public relations and marketing for the 7 Rivers Region branch.

"I appreciate that the work I am doing is going to something good," she says.

The organization helps to have a positive impact on young people's lives through connection and support. A positive adult role model has three main components, according to Bickett: patience, commitment and fun.

"If Bigs have those (qualities), they will be good matches," she says.

Bigs undergo thorough background checks for safety and must commit to at least one year of mentorship, otherwise youth tend to feel abandoned by an inconsistent role model, she says.

Focusing on fun

Some local businesses offer discounts for mentors to take their Littles on outings such as bowling and movies. But simply sledding and baking together have been some of Finn and Summer's favorite outings together.

"The intent is, let's go have fun and explore and try something new," says Finn, who is owner of Finnotté's Nut & Chocolate Shop in La Crosse. "I want her to learn, but I don't want that to be the focus," she says. "I want it to be a result of what we're doing."

Finn has been Summer's mentor for three years and has watched her grow from a timid child to a more confident almost-11-year-old who likes to try new things.

With Finn's mentorship, Summer has learned how to swim and ride a bike.

They enjoy swimming, ice skating and making string art together. They have had special learning experiences that involve experimenting with ice cream floats and ringing bells for the Salvation Army.

"I put all my energy and heart into it," says Finn. "I want her to learn and have fun by exploring and having challenges."

Big Sister superpowers

Finn has two grown children of her own and "loads of grandkids," she says. She is the third oldest of 11 kids in her family and loves being with kids. She works six days a week at Finnotté's, the family business she has owned with her husband, Frank Finn, since 1986.

As for her desire to mentor, she says, "I knew I had the time and energy, and I knew there was a need."

Finn enjoys the special teaching moments and everyday experiences with Summer. "I benefit immensely from mentoring," she says. "Instead of being home on my time off, I'm sledding and swimming and having fun."

Summer benefits equally in the mentorship. "It's really fun to be with Laurie, and I like eating at her house," she says.

Summer has two siblings also matched with mentors, and she describes her outings with Finn as a chance to "have fun" and "try new things." The smile on Summer's face clearly shows how mentors can become heroes in young people's lives.

"Heroes save other people, and they have superpowers," says Summer.

For a positive role model like Finn, the superpowers of being patient, reliable and fun add up to a magic mix. **(crw)**

Jan Wellik is a writer and educator based in the La Crosse area.

| ACCOMPLISHMENTS |



**Ladwig Is
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*Heather Ladwig,
Dahl Automotive*

Dahl Automotive is proud to announce Heather Ladwig's recent promotion to Vice President of Human Resources. Ladwig is a tremendous asset to Dahl's Executive Leadership Team and dealerships—supporting, training, advising and championing its servant leadership culture. Graduating with a bachelor's degree in business from Viterbo in 2000, Ladwig majored in Human Resources and Business Management. She has worked in the HR field since 1999, has attained certification with the Professional Human Resources Association and is a member of the La Crosse Area Society for HR Management Chapter.



Trust Point Celebrates Award-Winning Culture

The La Crosse-based wealth management firm Trust Point has been awarded the Best Places to Work for the third year in a row by the Business Intelligence Group. This award identifies organizations improving performance by challenging employees in a fun and engaging work environment. Trust Point was honored for helping their employees accelerate their careers, knowledge and performance. Results were determined by employee survey questions on employee satisfaction.

Trust Point's team of compassionate and dedicated employees has built a company culture focused on doing what's right for clients, staff and the community ... and have fun doing it!

Want to experience the culture? Learn more at www.trustpointinc.com.



**Patty Barge
Named
Outstanding
Woman**

The Women's Fund of Greater La Crosse has named Patty Barge, founder of Amy's Closet, its 2020 Roberta Zurn Outstanding Women in Leadership Award winner. Amy's Closet, in Holmen, provides emergency supplies like clothing, hygiene products, toys and more to area women and families. Barge named the project for her late sister Amy, an advocate for children.

The Women's Fund provides grants to social service organizations that support women and girls in the Coulee Region. The annual Roberta Zurn Award, named for philanthropist and volunteer Roberta Zurn, is awarded to women in our community who have encouraged the advancement of women and girls.



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CREATING HEROES

Author Danielle Trussoni explains how family influences fiction.

BY JESS WITKINS

Contributed photos

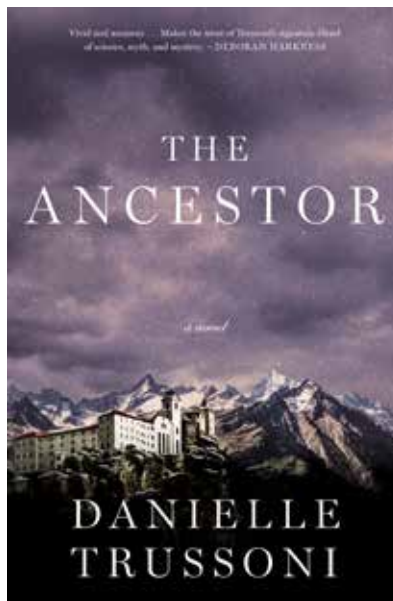
In her newest novel, *The Ancestor*, La Crosse native and *New York Times* best-selling author Danielle Trussoni uses the shocking results of an ancestry test to craft a heroine who inherits more secrets than long-lost family, and more mystery than money. Here, Trussoni tells how the familiar influences fiction.

Your family grew up here in the Coulee Region. How has this area influenced your writing?

My family comes from many areas in the Coulee Region. My mother grew up on 17th and King Streets in La Crosse, and my father was born and raised in Genoa. My early years were spent outside of Onalaska, where my parents bought land and built a house. When my parents divorced, my father moved to the North Side of La Crosse, and I spent a few years there with him. So I can say that I've been influenced by a lot of places in the area, especially because my first book was a memoir about my family, and I therefore wrote quite a lot about the places I had known as a child.

You took a DNA test in which you learned your identity as an Italian American was more story than statistic. How shocked were you?

I was totally amazed! We grew up with the idea that our family had Italian heritage, and we were made to feel proud of that. It was a



shock to discover that the concept of being “Italian American” is very much constructed.

In *The Ancestor*, the main character, Bert, is caught unaware of her family's ancestry and must reckon with what to be accountable for and what to move forward with. What do you think makes Bert a character to root for?

Bert's struggle is the struggle of an outsider to understand why she cannot find “her place.” As it turns out, there is a familial explanation

for why she has always been kept on the outside of her community. I think that we all secretly wonder if there is something about us that makes us different—at least I have felt that way!—and Bert's journey mirrors that.

You have held workshops that focus on using ancestry in fictional writing. What do you love about blending the mythological with the possible?

Fiction is the perfect place to explore the “what ifs” of our family, our heritage and our ancestry. I have been endlessly fascinated by my family stories and have found that many of the novels I love began as explorations of family history. These workshops take a closer look at how family stories and ancestry can be used to create fictional stories.

It seems to me that we love ancestral stories because we believe that our ancestors can explain who we are, and our meaning and place in the world. I'm not talking about nationality per se, but the people whose work created the conditions for our lives. **(CfW)**

Jess Witkins is a writer, blogger and storyteller. Her mission: making pathetic look cool since 1985. She can often be found wordmongering in the Coulee Region's many coffee shops.

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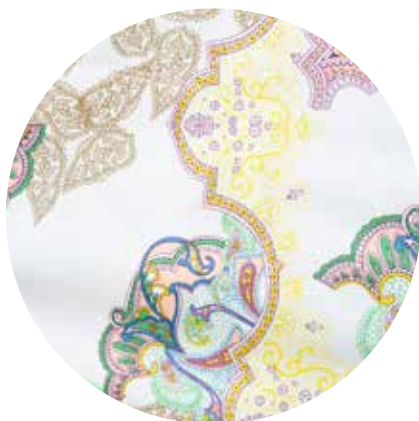
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Summer SPRING FASHION FORECAST

Plan for a printy mix, with showers of flowers.

Photos by Frontier Photography

Spring trends are blooming before our eyes, and they couldn't be more welcome. Look for prints of all shades, florals galore and eye-catching embroidery at local boutiques. We found ours at Touch of Class, Mainstream Boutique and Urban Shoetique.



Pastel prints

When the forecast calls for spring showers, **Touch of Class** has got you covered with layers of soft prints accented by pops of color.

Ilse Jacobsen raincoat, Pashmina scarf, Elliott Lauren "Infinity" jean, Mer-Sea "Catalina" crewneck sweater, Kendra Scott "Avi" rose gold hoop earrings, Hobo International "King" wristlet, Ilse Jacobsen "Tulip" recycled microfiber shoes. Modeled by Michelle Poedel, meteorologist at WKBT.





Flower power

Florals are big again in 2020, here in a delicately patterned top with sweet lace and tassel details. Color is the new khaki in earthy green pants from **Mainstream Boutique**.

Floral top, \$56; ruffle-ankle pants, \$74; lace cami, \$32; natural healing stone bracelets, \$35 each/set of 3 for \$96; custom-made necklace, \$82; peep-toe shoes, \$56. Modeled by Shari Mitteco.

Exquisite embroidery

Lush embroidery and classic, comfortable linen combine in an unforgettable ensemble. Leather earrings and a beaded necklace complete the story by **Urban Shoetique**.

Johnny Was "Eyal" linen cardigan, \$310; Johnny Was "Eyal" tier palazzo pant, \$250; Yana K "Tara" top, \$110; MC90 beaded necklace, \$90; Cecelia Jewelry earrings, \$28, Antelope braided wedge, \$185. Modeled by Miranda TerBeest.



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