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FEATURE STORY



Students at Discovery Christian School listen as teacher Nate Coomer instructs them. Photo by Cathy Griffith.

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Discovery Christian School incorporates a biblical worldview

by Cathy Griffith

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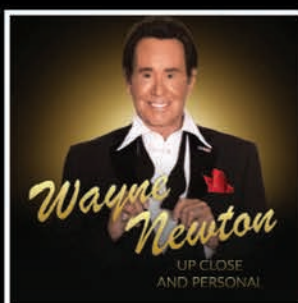
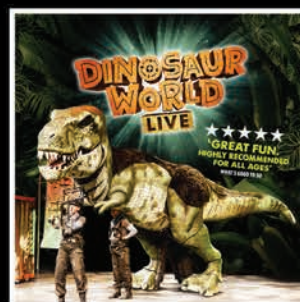
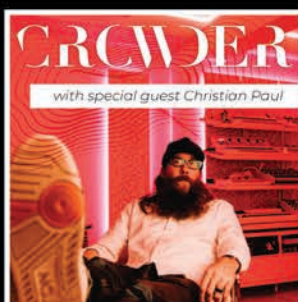
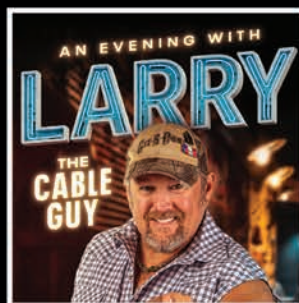
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ON THE COVER: Rowen Haywood, 2, plays with glitter and glue while his grandmother, Lori Haywood, helps supervise him during the Feb. 12 Homeschooling Connections program at the Effingham Public Library. Photo by Marie Adamick



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Educating young people is a crucial responsibility for any thriving community. There are many ways that can be accomplished. We take a look at three examples in this edition of Effingham Magazine: Parents who teach their children at home, a public school teacher congratulated by the governor for her methods and the faith-based workings of a private school.

Marie Adamick recently visited Homeschooling Connections at the Effingham Public Library, which meets quarterly. The educational program helps homeschooled children ages 12 and under learn how to behave and socialize.

That's where she met Delissa and Dakota Roley, parents of second grader Gwenelda.

"My favorite part is that it's flexible, and if she's lacking on something then I actually have time to teach her," said Delissa. "We can create our own homework here, and if she's understanding it, there's no reason for us to keep repeating it constantly."

Cathy Griffith visited Christ's Church expanded Discovery Christian School in Effingham, which now caters to students through eighth grade.

"We just jumped in with both feet and determined if we wanted that we could make it happen," said Pastor Jeff Michael.

While daily Bible study is included in the curriculum, a biblical worldview is incorporated into all subjects, from including works of C.S. Lewis in English literature, for example, to showing how Jesus, a carpenter, would measure something. Michael calls it subtle integration.

"It's about being able to appropriate your faith in daily life and teaching kids how to do that," said Michael.

On a more secular level, Effingham Junior High School teacher Becky Wilson is demonstrating how effective public education can be.

Her students were among other eighth graders in the state whose scores outperformed the national average in math, according to the 2024 National Report Card. However, Wilson was the one Gov. J.B. Pritzker chose to call recently to congratulate on a job well done.

"Your eighth graders and, frankly, all the eighth graders across the state of Illinois, but especially at Effingham Junior High, did an amazing job outperforming the rest of the country on math and science NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores and I just wanted to thank you for the hard work you put in and they put in to succeed for the state of Illinois," he said. "You're crushing it."

Elsewhere, we check in with Rein Schmidt, 73, of Newton, a volunteer weather observer, who recently earned the highest award the National Weather Service gives out to volunteer observers. It's about time. He began watching the weather for NWS in 1975.

We also check in with Dustin Rhodes and Cheyenne Brown-Rhodes, who operate Forge a Memory in St. Elmo, making and selling custom knives and other things, and Axe on Main, where people can try their hand at axe and star throwing.

Their skills garnered them national attention on History Channel's popular competition show, "Forged in Fire." Dustin competed in season 4, episode 2, while Cheyenne was featured in season 9, episode 5.

Those stories and more make up your Spring 2025 Effingham Magazine.



Jeff Long
Editor



Jeff Long is the editor of the Effingham Daily News. He is a 1987 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and has worked for newspapers in England, Pennsylvania and Virginia. For 13 years, he was a reporter and later an editor at the Chicago Tribune. A past president and current board member of the Illinois Associated Press Media Editors, he lives in Altamont with his wife, Karen.



Cathy Griffith is news editor of the Effingham Daily News. She is a 1998 graduate of Eastern Illinois University with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism. She has worked at the Daily News for 22 years in news and magazine publications. She is a lifelong resident of Effingham, where she resides with her husband, Tim, and daughter, Leah.



Marie Adamick is the newest reporter at the Effingham Daily News. Before deciding to major in journalism, she considered majoring in international business or chemistry. She graduated from University of Cincinnati in 2024 with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and a minor in History. A greater Cincinnati native, she enjoys traveling, collecting music, and going on hikes. She recently moved to Effingham to start her job at the paper and has family in Wisconsin, Cincinnati and St. Louis.

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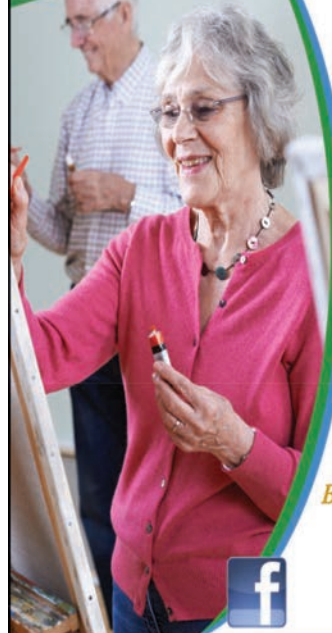
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Students at Discovery Christian School listen as teacher Nate Coomer instructs them.

Discovery Christian School incorporates a biblical worldview into all subjects

Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

Christ's Church opened Discovery Christian Pre-school in Effingham in 2004. For years, though, some church members envisioned expanding the school with additional grades.

In 2020, church members began seeing an increased need for such a school. The church had also reached a point where it could house and support it.

That summer, a group consisting of Julie Koester, Kathy Wormhoudt and the late Leon Holschbach began touring Christian-based schools.

"We just jumped in with both feet and determined if we wanted that we could make it happen," said Pastor Jeff Michael.

Wormhoudt and Koester took over setting up the school, with Wormhoudt focused on the academic side and Koester on the business side. Now retired from Effingham Unit 40, Wormhoudt has over 30 years of experience as a teacher, and Koester is a former part-owner of Effingham Truck

Sales. She also is a retired graphic designer and set up the school's website.

The two worked around the clock for a year establishing the school.

"We were up all night between the two of us. She stays up late in the night and I get up at like 3 or 4 a.m. So, one of us would always be up praying and working on this. It was like we were a 24-hour team," said Koester.

Not sure they could execute junior high, they initially intended to educate kindergarten through fifth grade. But Koester said there was strong interest in including junior high. So, they decided to try it.

"A lot of this was just bold faith stuff. If this is what we feel we should do, let's just figure out a way to do it," said Michael.

They also weren't sure about having music and band. Then they hired Jeremy Bridges, who is a musician. Bridges became the music teacher and the art teacher, PE teacher and lunchroom manager, drawing from his career as a restaurant manager.



First graders work on a project in Angelique Bridges' class at Discovery Christian School.

"When we had him hired and listened to his vision of what he wanted for the school, we were all a little taken back because he's very smart, very talented in many areas and we all thought, 'Gosh, we could do more than we thought with him here,'" said Koester.

They were able to offer extracurricular activities such as basketball after hiring collegiate basketball player Nate Coomer as a junior high teacher. The school also offers chorus, chess club, cross country and cheer-leading.

"We've been able to offer a lot of programs, and it's all because we have such good, talented people working here," said Koester.

In the fall of 2021, Discovery Christian School opened with an enrollment of 78. They were not expecting that high of an enrollment, according to Koester. Michael attributes the high enrollment to the school mandates during COVID. But, he adds, that isn't why the school has maintained that enrollment and higher, with 95 students this year.

"We started it because we wanted

them to learn about the Bible. It's all about the Bible here," said Koester.

While daily Bible study is included in the curriculum, a biblical worldview is incorporated into all subjects, from including works of C.S. Lewis in English literature, for example, to showing how Jesus, a carpenter, would measure something. Michael calls it subtle integration.

"It's about being able to appropriate your faith in daily life and teaching kids how to do that," said Michael.

Michael believes education needs to be more about teaching people how to think as opposed to just imparting information to them.

"If they know how to think, then they can process all information. So, with a biblical

worldview, they can evaluate everything that comes the rest of their life," he said.

The school, like the church, is non-denominational, welcoming all faiths. While only half the student population are members of Christ's Church, Koester asserts they are not trying to compete with other schools, including the local parochial schools.

Liz Horton teaches third grade students at Discovery Christian School.





Jeremy Bridges directs students in Chorus at Discovery Christian School.

"It's just another option," she said.

Koester notes Sacred Heart and St. Anthony staff have helped answer questions and have provided a lot of information.

Michael stresses that the school is not "anti-anything," including public school. Michael was a Unit 40 school board member for eight years and has a son who attends.

"He has different special needs, so that's the best environment for him," he said, noting that providing for special needs is the one thing the school isn't able to accommodate due to a lack of funding and resources.

"We just felt there was a niche need for a non-denominational protestant private school," he said.

That need has come from as far as Casey, Olney and Cowden to Altamont and Teutopolis, citing some of the hometowns of students enrolled.

The School

The typical school day has the same hours and days as any other, following Unit 40's schedule. The school's funding comes from tuition, the church and fundraising. Students attend classes in the church's basement, where rooms have been added since it started.

The school has a principal and nine teachers, as well as a speech teacher and resource teacher for students who need extra help.

Although the school uses the Bob Jones University curriculum, the students take Iowa standardized tests used in public and other schools to measure their academic progress.

The school expects enrollment to grow to over 100 next year, nearing their maximum capacity of 144 with 16 in each class. Koester said the lower grades have consistently been pretty full, and they hope to house more students in the future, as there is a waiting list.

For those who meet the criteria, the school does provide some tuition assistance based on donations.

"Effingham has been really good to us. A lot of people donate money. Sometimes, we get a check from someone we don't even know who they are really. It's a thing I think people are passionate about having here," said Koester.

Why Attend?

Michael describes the environment as peaceful with minimal conflict, which he said has helped ease students' anxiety.

"We have had quite a few kids come in with anxiety. We work with them. The staff, we have wonderful office people. They come in, and their parents are like they actually like school, and they aren't going to fight them to get ready to go. Just enjoy the day," he said.

Koester believes the peaceful atmosphere has to do with what the students are studying – the Bible – and its moral guide.



Discovery Christian School

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Fourteen-year-old Audrey Shouse finds it much more peaceful than when she attended public school.

"I feel it's more inviting here," she said. "I feel like I really get along with everybody here. Since we have such a smaller classroom, we can all communicate and really share our thoughts with each other."

Shouse finds the teachers friendly and understanding. If she has a problem, she's not afraid to go up and ask questions.

"It's a lot easier than when I went to public school," she said.

Shouse also said her grades have improved.

"I think I've learned a lot more," she said.

Shouse is part of an experimental small group of ninth graders at the

school. However, she will have to go to a different school next year after administrators realized they could not provide students with what they needed at the high school level.

Shouse said she doesn't want to transfer to another school.

"Whenever we fight, we always like make up and forget about it. So, everybody is super comfortable with each other, and nobody's left out, and everybody's just understanding," she said.

Her father, Tom Shouse, doesn't know where Audrey and her brother, who is graduating eighth grade, will attend school next year.

He enrolled them and his other daughter because he wanted them to have a Christian background.

"I also didn't want to follow the state mandates everybody was pushing," he said.

Angelique Bridges and her husband, Jeremy, had been homeschooling their daughter following COVID because she has asthma and couldn't wear a mask. They were looking for a place to enroll her when they saw a survey for the school on Facebook.

"We knew at that point that we were going to bring our daughter here for sure," said Angelique.

Jeremy was looking for a career change and wanted to teach music. As a manager at TGI Fridays, he also wanted work hours more conducive to family life.

"When we came to interview for our daughter, we began to ask questions and talk to them about working here, specifically my husband," she said.

Angelique had been teaching in public schools and Head Start for over 20 years and found it the perfect time to leave her position.

"It was a God opportunity for our entire family, and it's totally changed our lives," said Angelique, who now teaches first grade at Discovery.

She also wanted the freedom to teach about Jesus to her students.

"I've never had that as a teacher. I've been told numerous times you can't use baby Jesus. You can't talk about Jesus. You can't pray with your kids. That was really hard for me," she said.

It's the reason Wormhoudt helped start the school. As a long-time public educator, she didn't like not having the freedom to bring God into the classroom.

"It ties the Bible and the Christian life into all subject areas," she said of the school.

Koester said the school strives to provide a good foundation for students.

"One of these days, when they leave here, we want them to be able to say, 'This is what I believe, and this is why I believe what I believe,'" said Koester.

Librarian Sonja Davidson helps a student at Discovery Christian School.





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Homeschooling CONNECTIONS

From left, siblings 4-year-old Aurora Dillworth, 4-year-old Charlotte Schafer and 6-year-old Carter Dillworth make Valentines during the Feb. 12 Homeschooling Connections program at the Effingham Public Library.

Effingham library program connects kids

Marie Adamick
Effingham Magazine

Homeschooling Connections at the Effingham Public Library meets quarterly. Hosted by Programming Coordinator Kaitlyn Parker, 19, the educational program helps homeschooled children ages 12 and younger learn how to behave and socialize.

Parker has been in charge of the program since it started up again after the COVID pandemic. Her first time running it was on Valentine's Day 2024. Because it fell on a holiday, students learned about compassion, Valentine's Day and National Spread Kindness Day, made Valentine's Day cards and did an activity where all the kids complimented each other.

The Homeschooling Connections event on Feb. 12 saw several families and children celebrating Valentine's Day again by making Valentine's Day boxes and cards and participating in a small scavenger hunt. Parker hid small, red paper hearts around the children's section of the library for the kids to find after they finished their crafts.

"I just like getting to meet all the kids, also show them all the opportunities we have here for homeschoolers and learn more about what they need from us as a library," said Parker.

The library also provides a feedback form to the parents and guardians that asks if there are any topics, activities or resources that could help support them in their homeschooling efforts.

She sees lots of homeschooling parents and families come into the library. Although she does not know how many kids are homeschooled in Effingham, Parker believes more kids are homeschooled than some people may realize.

"I think it's growing a lot," she said. "I hear so many parents say that, like, 'Oh, we just started homeschooling last week or this week,' and it's like, 'Wow. Let me show you where all these books are that are good for homeschooling. Let me know what I can do.'"

The U.S. Census estimates that during the 2022-2023 school years, an average of 3.2% of Illinois kindergarten through 12th grade students were homeschooled.

The only specific requirement to homeschool in Illinois is state-mandated subjects, which are language arts, math, biological and physical sciences (as one combined branch), physical development and health (another combined branch), social sciences and fine arts.

However, if the child is considering college, it is recommended to use the same high school graduation requirements used in public schools. According to the Illinois State Board of Education's website, certain employers, the military, vocational schools, trade schools and colleges may have specific course requirements.

The ISBE's website also says that homeschooled students cannot take state accountability tests that are used in public schools because the purpose of them is to measure how well public schools in Illinois are meeting the Illinois Learning Standards. There are also no requirements for the number of school days or length of a school day for homeschooled students. However, the ISBE's website encourages keeping a consistent schedule, especially if the parent or guardian is planning to enroll their child or children into a public school in the future.

Even though it is not legally mandated, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) recommends keeping records of the child's academic progress for at least two years, so there is proof that they are receiving a good-faith education in the required subject areas. These can include



Top, Riley Plumb, 13, props up a phone camera trying to get her 2-year-old nephew Paxton Schafer to crawl to her during the Feb. 12 Homeschooling Connections at the Effingham Public Library. Above, Delissa Roley holds her daughter, Gwenelda Roley, in her arms after Gwenelda played her Nex Playground.

attendance records, a list of textbooks and other materials, samples of the child's schoolwork, testing results, correspondence with school officials, portfolios and any other documents showing the child is receiving an appropriate education in compliance with the law. It is also recommended to keep their high school records and proof of compliance with the home education laws during their high school years on file forever.

According to the HSLDA's website, homeschooling is considered a private school under Illinois law. Because of this, the child or children being homeschooled may be eligible for services funded by the state of Illinois and the feder-

al Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, parents and guardians cannot register their private school with the state of Illinois, and they cannot get recognized by the state. The law does not allow it.

If a child is currently enrolled in public schooling, HSLDA recommends sending a letter to the school's principal to avoid any confusion or truancy concerns. But there is not a mandate to file a homeschool notice or any other paperwork with local school officials or the state of Illinois.

Local schools may have specific forms or withdrawal procedures. If so, it's recommended to keep copies of the paperwork.

Effingham Unit 40 Schools require a withdrawal form to be completed and submitted, according to Executive Secretary Michelle Morrissey. This school year, 19 previously homeschooled children began attending Unit 40, and 21 left the district to begin homeschooling, said Morrissey.

Altamont Unit 10 District Secretary Kayla Pontious said the schools have an optional withdrawal form. Dieterich Unit 30 District Secretary Julie Flach said they don't require a withdrawal form to be submitted.

Delissa, 34, and Dakota Roley, 28, submitted this form for their second grader Gwenelda, 7, at Central Grade School when they pulled her out at the start of 2025. Gwenelda does her homeschooling through an online program and with worksheets.

Delissa and Dakota both work late, so by the time they got off work, picked Gwenelda up from the babysitter's house, went home and went to sleep, it was around 1 a.m. They would then all get up around 7 a.m. to get Gwenelda to school.

"We started having some issues with truancy because she was tardy a lot of times because it was also hard for us to get up super early in the morning after not getting any sleep," said Delissa. "She wasn't absorbing the information."

Homeschooling works much better for the family.



Top, Sierra Olinger holds her son, Paxton Schafer, 2, during the Feb. 12 Homeschooling Connections program at the Effingham Public Library. Above, Gwenelda Roley plays her Nex Playground at home while her mother Delissa watches.



"My favorite part is that it's flexible, and if she's lacking on something then I actually have time to teach her," said Delissa. "We can create our own homework here, and if she's understanding it, there's no reason for us to keep repeating it constantly."

The online program they use keeps track of her grades, attendance, how many lessons she completes and if she needs improvement in a certain subject. Delissa can also control which lessons she's assigned, and she can even bump her daughter up a grade if needed.

"Honestly, homeschooling is kind of a breeze with the program that we're using," said Delissa. "I get to customize what lessons she does, how many times she does them through the week on what days. They have a whole curriculum that they use on their own. The only thing that I really have to do is print off her lessons, print

activities and do spelling."

Gwenelda wanted to be homeschooled, even though Delissa was hesitant at first.

"I didn't really want to do that because I wanted to keep her in with all the kids and everything," said Delissa. "I didn't really think it would be good for her, but I figured, 'Why not?' Let's do the rest of second grade at home and see how it goes. And so far, she's doing great."

Each day, they do a few hours of schooling.

On Mondays and Thursdays, they work on reading, language arts and math. Reading and language arts are through the online program. Gwenelda practices math in the workbooks Delissa purchases from the local Dollar Tree. They do a few math pages each time.

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, Gwenelda completes her social studies and science lessons at her babysitter's house. Also on Thursdays, they visit the library to check out books for Gwenelda to read throughout the week. On Fridays, they do art, Spanish lessons and any other activities they come up with.

For the days they stay home all day, Gwenelda gets her physical exercise by playing her artificial intelligence video game system, Nex Play-ground, that she got for Christmas last year.

"She loves it," said Delissa. "I actually recommend having this for any kids through the winter. ... It's very physical."

Finding ways for Gwenelda to socialize isn't too difficult for the Roley family. They have family in the area that she plays with, and she interacts with other kids at her babysitter's home, which she goes to three to four times each week depending on her parents' work hours. Gwenelda also enjoys going to The Arena Trampoline Park in town.

Delissa is also part of a homeschooling Facebook group where people host different events for local homeschooling families.

"The activities we do with the homeschool groups are a big bonus because she's an only child, so she doesn't have that interaction all the time," said Delissa.

Delissa was working during this year's Homeschooling Connections event, so her mother, Spring Roley, took Gwenelda to help her learn how to socialize even more.

"I just like getting to meet all the kids, show them all the opportunities we have here for homeschoolers and learn more about what they need from us as a library."

— Kaitlyn Parker, Effingham Public Library programming coordinator

"I want her to be familiar with how to socialize with other people," said Delissa. "I don't want her to be one of those kids that thinks it's OK to just sit in their room all the time and don't want to go around people because they're scared."

Maggie Burton was another mom who attended Homeschooling Connections this year. She brought her 2½-year-old son, Rowen Haywood, and her 11-month-old daughter, Navy Haywood.

Even though her children are not yet of school age, she is considering homeschooling them because she believes it is more freeing.

"You don't have to have rushed mornings, and from what I've read, you can do homeschooling in a

couple of hours versus them being at school all day," said Burton. "I'm just more into that way of life."

When they're older, she would like to teach them how to garden and grow their own food.

"I feel like in the last few years, public schools have changed a lot in the fact that there's more danger, school shootings, bullying, all kinds of things," said Burton. "I've been seeing more bus wrecks and things like that. So, also just to keep them safe."



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Dustin Rhodes forges a piece of metal
into a knife by hammering it.

Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

Dustin Rhodes and Cheyenne Brown-Rhodes move in tandem around the small forging area of their shop in St. Elmo, taking turns heating metal, hammering it, and grinding it into a blade. The couple has an unspoken communication that moves like a choreographed routine.

It's a typical day for the rural couple whose skills garnered them national attention on History Channel's popular competition show, "Forged in Fire." Dustin competed in season 4, episode 2, while Cheyenne was featured in season 9, episode 5.

They now operate Forge a Memory, making and selling custom knives and other things, and Axe on Main, where people can try their hand at axe and star throwing.

The two met when Cheyenne came to Dustin's home shop. She was doing bone carving and asked Dustin what she could do with it.

"I was like, 'Hey, why don't you put a blade at the end of it,'" he recalled.

From there, he began showing her how to make it.

Dustin, who has been forging for 31 years, has educated many others. He taught some blacksmithing classes at Kas-kaskia College. He's also created instructional video content as well as contributed to a book, "Next Level Knifemaking."

However, Dustin didn't learn his skills through formal training but was self-taught.

It started when Dustin was a child and participated in frontier reenactments with his family. Everyone had a trade, so Dustin chose blacksmithing. At 10, he started making camp sets, tripods, s-hooks, flint and steel kits and sold and traded them. But Dustin admits he had a painful learning curve.

"I burnt myself in the fire for a couple of years, literally, before I really started making stuff," he said.

Dustin was always interested in knives and turned to making them when he was 12.

Much of his education came from Foxfire or Buckskinner books and watching live demonstrations.

Years later, in 2017, his skills earned him a spot in "Forged in Fire." He didn't win, but the following year, he competed on another show, "Master of Arms," on Discovery Channel, where he became a finalist.

Under his tutelage, others went on to compete on the show.

In 2019, Dustin's apprentice Josh Nicolaides of Vandalia was chosen to compete in season 6, episode 3 of "Forged in Fire," and won.

A couple of years later, Cheyenne responded to an open casting call, mainly as a joke.

"I applied because of being told you're too small to actually do what we do," said Cheyenne, who weighs a little over 100

From left, Cheyenne Brown-Rhodes, Dustin Rhodes and Josh Nicolaides pose in the Forge a Memory shop in St. Elmo. All three competed on History Channel's "Forged in Fire."





Cheyenne Brown-Rhodes grinds a blade she just forged at Forge a Memory in St. Elmo.

pounds. Although she didn't win, competing against all men, she proved "it's not just a guy's thing."

Dustin said the shows provide a challenge, not with the other competitors but with the contestant themselves.

"Any skilled blacksmith should be able to walk into a reasonably equipped shop and turn out a product of some sort," he said. "Can you do it within the time constraints with the challenge set before you? It's not just a physical challenge; it's a mental challenge, and the physical aspect of the challenge isn't just how I can hammer this out. You're also looking at how hot it gets in that studio when they're forging when you've got four forges going. When you got seven or eight camera men right here. What are you worried about the most? Trying not to burn you guys when you're interviewing me while I'm forging. But that's all part of the show."

Challenges drive a lot of his inspiration – and historical references.

"I always like the frontier-style movies like 'Dances with Wolves' or 'The Last of the Mohicans,' he said. "Like, oh, that is so cool. I would love to have that. Fire up the forge, and you make it."

Cheyenne also likes to challenge herself.

"Especially if I see an item that most people kind of cringe about," she said.

She has made items ranging from a Yatagan sword down to miniature Damascus snake pendants with scale texture, eyes and facial features.

Dustin admits her motor skills are better than his when it comes to making little intricate carvings and forged pendants.

"I have hypermobility, so I use that to my advantage," she said.

Cheyenne finds forging therapeutic and expressive.

"You can have so much anger and grab a piece of steel that most people would think is trash. You're able to just beat it after you get it hot and bring something out beautiful," she said.

Sometimes, they are inspired by other smiths and are fans of other competitors on the show. They have learned the feeling is mutual.

Cheyenne discovered that when she met her "hero," Jennifer Lyddane, at Robby Bowman's Grudge Match in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

"She ran up and said hi, gave me a big hug, and took off. Found out she was a fan of mine," said Cheyenne.

The two say the network of bladesmiths learn new things from each other.

"It's all about learning," said Dustin.

While the two have dabbled in making jewelry through pewter casting, they primarily forge, which Dustin explains is taking a piece of steel, heating it up to a critical temperature, and then physically manipulating that material with a hammer and an anvil.

They offer a couple of different classes on it at their shop that include making nail knives, horseshoe knives and railroad spike knives.

"We do offer other classes that are custom-tailored to what the consumer wants to learn. So, if someone comes in and wants to make a Bowie knife or a hunting knife or do forge welding to make Damascus steel, we schedule that. Each person wants something a little different, so we try to be as fulfilling as possible," said Dustin.

They also do heirloom builds. Customers occasionally bring in a metal object and ask them to turn it into something else.

"Hey, there's a section of spring from grandpa's C-10, can you make me a knife out of it?' We probably can," said Dustin.

Sometimes, their creations are more obscure.

Dustin created a knife that won Most Unusual at the 2022 Gateway Area Knife Club Show. The recurved fighter features a meteorite Damascus blade, a 100-plus-year-old wrought iron fitting, and a handle made from human femur bone that was a retired antique medical specimen.

"I thought, you know what? I bet that would grab me some attention, and, you know what, it did," said Dustin.

The couple shares their expertise with others beyond the shop.

Once a year, they teach at Turtle Island Preserve in North Carolina, founded by Eustace Conway, who was featured on the History Channel's "Mountain Men."

They also like to reach out to fans and offer guidance when asked.

The television exposure has brought them fans throughout the U.S. and worldwide. People from New Zealand and South Africa have come to their shop.

“The group from New Zealand that came in were huge fans who saw me on the episode,” said Cheyenne.

Cheyenne notes their fan bases differ by region. While Dustin is popular in the UK, she is popular in South America and Germany.

“You always know when your episode is playing as a rerun because you start getting friend requests on social media from specific regions,” said Dustin.

“It’s so cool because you get to see where your episode is going across the world because that’s where those friend requests are coming from. It’s astounding,” added Cheyenne.

The exposure has opened a lot of opportunities not only in business but also in helping others.

“We do a lot of promotion for local benefits, whether that’s medical or someone’s lost a home,” said Dustin. “We do that seems like a lot around here, and it’s nice to be able to give back to the community that way.”

They’ve also helped others further away, raising money for hurricane relief in North Carolina last year.

The two are passing their knowledge on to future generations, with each of their children and now Dustin’s grandchildren learning the skill.

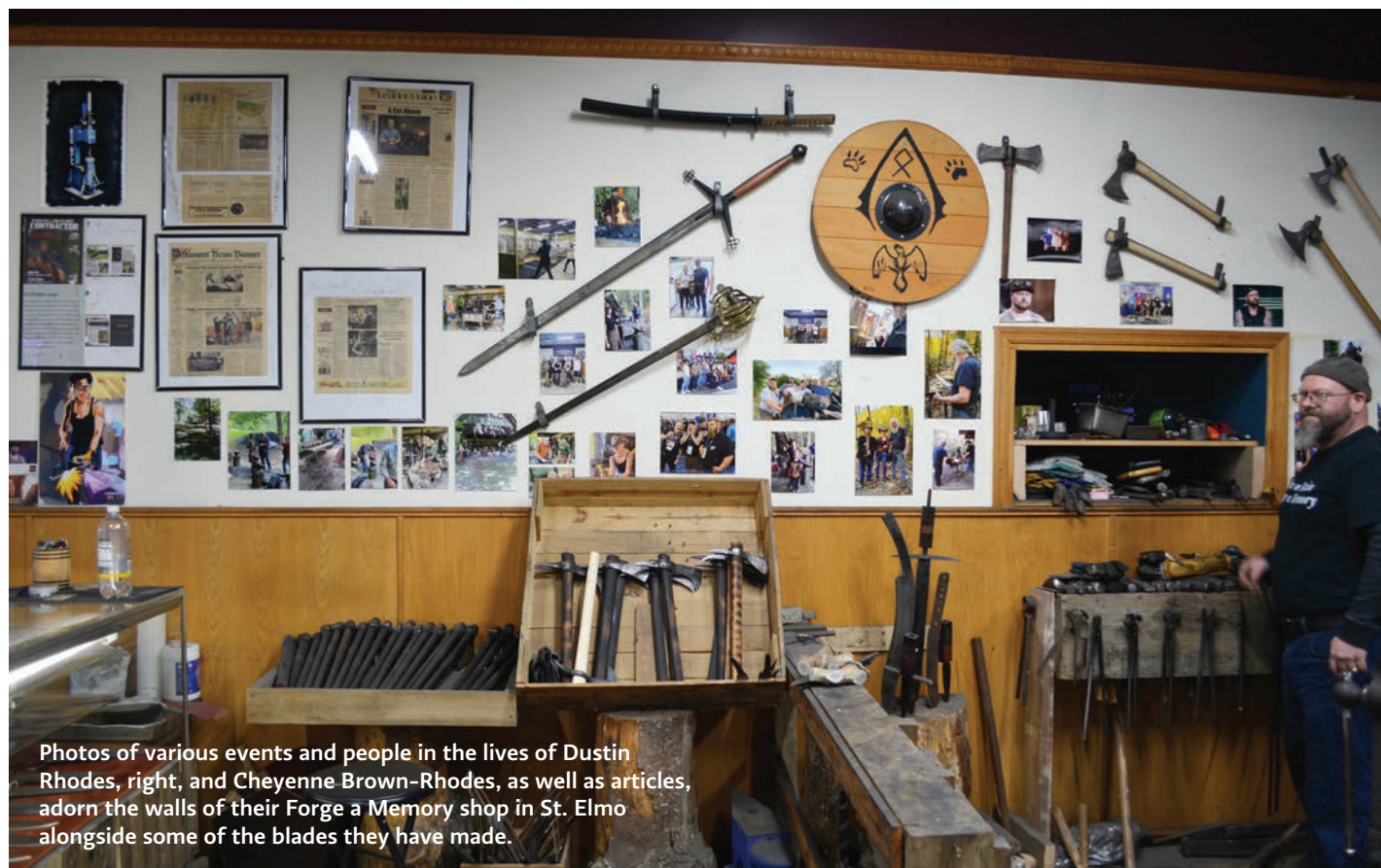
“My son forges now. He also does the axe throwing,” said Cheyenne, adding he’s been accepted into the World Axe Throwing League.

Dustin said their plans are to grow as a family and live life well.

And “see what else I could do that other people could do but just don’t.”



Dustin created a knife that won Most Unusual at the 2022 Gateway Area Knife Club Show. The recurved fighter features a meteorite Damascus blade, a 100-plus-year-old wrought iron fitting, and a handle made from human femur bone that was a retired antique medical specimen.



Photos of various events and people in the lives of Dustin Rhodes, right, and Cheyenne Brown-Rhodes, as well as articles, adorn the walls of their Forge a Memory shop in St. Elmo alongside some of the blades they have made.



How to garden when you love both dogs and plants

Jessica Damiano
Associated Press

They dig, they pee, they trample. Every gardener who has a dog knows it's hard for them to coexist with garden plants. How can you keep each safe from the other?

Protect your dog by avoiding any plants that are toxic to pets. Avoid using chemicals. Choose a resilient lawn grass, though there might not be one tough enough to survive regular kicking from a larger dog.

Plant garden beds densely so dogs won't run through them. Use fences. Also, consider creating a digging and play zone. You can enclose it with fencing and put dog toys there. Provide plenty of water.

Yes, you'll likely have to lower your aesthetic standards some. But enjoying two of life's greatest pleasures is well worth the compromise.

If you've ever had a dog, you know they don't exactly tiptoe through the tulips. I'm fortunate that none of mine ever had a penchant for digging holes, but my late pit bull, Maddie, used to run through my perennial beds like a weed whacker, leaving horizontal coneflowers and black-eyed Susans in her destructive path. Her bathroom breaks would also imprint an ever-expanding array of canine crop circles on the lawn.

Fortunately, my little Havanese, Miguel, doesn't pose as much of a threat to my plants, but there are other important elements to consider when

planning a garden where dogs and plants can safely coexist.

Let's start with the lawn

The type of grass you select should be suited to your region and your sun exposure. In my sunny Northeastern front yard, that means starting with a Kentucky bluegrass seed blend, which holds up well against foot and paw traffic, and mixing in roughly 10 percent each of urine-resilient perennial ryegrass and shade-tolerant fine fescue.

For further protection, consider incorporating a trample- and urine-resistant groundcover into your grass-seed recipe. I've added clover, which also enriches the soil with safe, nourishing levels of nitrogen (free fertilizer!) and reduces or eliminates groundwater pollution from my property.

If you have a beagle-size dog or two, this will go a long way toward retaining your lawn's integrity. But, to be honest, I don't know of any grass that will hold up against a German shepherd or bull mastiff kicking it up on a daily basis. Still, starting with the most resilient grass species for your growing conditions will give you the best odds possible.

Barriers to entry

Typical landscaping designs often space plants far apart, leaving areas of mulch-covered soil between plants and shrubs. Dogs love to run obstacle courses on those bare paths, kicking up mulch and, invariably, straying into planting beds.

Instead, opt for a dense garden style that allows only enough space between plants for the expected mature size of each. By their third year, most of the gaps will be filled, eliminating the spaces and, along with them, the invitation to enter.

If you grow delicate plants or edibles, situate them in a raised bed or surround them with short fencing or another barrier to discourage entry.

Avoid toxic plants and chemicals

Next, consider safety. Many common plants are toxic to dogs (and cats), so avoid planting them altogether, even if your pet hasn't shown an interest in grazing. A one-time curiosity could spell disaster. Check with the ASPCA for a sortable list of plants (including weeds) that are toxic to cats, dogs and horses, and remove any that your pets could access.

This June 16, 2024, image provided by Jessica Damiano shows Miguel the Havanese sitting on a walkway surrounding a densely-planted garden on Long Island, N.Y. Such a garden design could help discourage entry by plant-trampling dogs.



Avoid using chemicals. If you must apply them, keep pets out of the garden until the products have dried or dissipated (read package labels carefully and observe warnings and cautionary statements).

Create a zone for digging and playing

If your dog is a digger, fill holes and lay sections of chicken wire over favorite digging spots, then cover them with a few inches of soil. I've never met a dog that wasn't deterred by wire.

Diggers will continue to dig, however, so designate a section of the yard where they can do so with reckless abandon. Bury some toys and bones for them to find, and place balls and other toys in there too. After introducing dogs to the area, watch closely and bring them to the digging zone whenever you catch them in the act elsewhere.

Such a play area or dog run would be a beneficial garden addition even if digging hasn't posed a problem, as it would reduce or eliminate plant trampling and lawn damage. Enclose it with fencing or another barrier that allows you to keep an eye on the dog – and vice versa.

Similarly, if space allows, designate a pebbled or mulched potty area. Train dogs to use it by moving scooped poop to the spot. Their noses will convey the message, but again, you'll have to watch closely and move them to the spot when they show signs of intent to relieve them-



selves elsewhere. It will take some time, but they should catch on.

Finally, be sure to provide access to a clean bowl of water at all times. It will refresh pups as they play outdoors and, as a bonus, dilute their urine to cut down on burn spots in your grass.

Jessica Damiano writes weekly gardening columns for the AP and publishes the award-winning Weekly Dirt Newsletter. You can sign up here for weekly gardening tips and advice.

For more AP gardening stories, go to <https://ap-news.com/hub/gardening>.

This April 23, 2019, image provided by Jessica Damiano shows Maddie, a pitbull mix, standing in a vacant spot between plants in a Long Island, N.Y., garden. Dense garden-bed designs that don't allow for such unplanted patches discourage entry by plant-trampling dogs who enjoy running laps.

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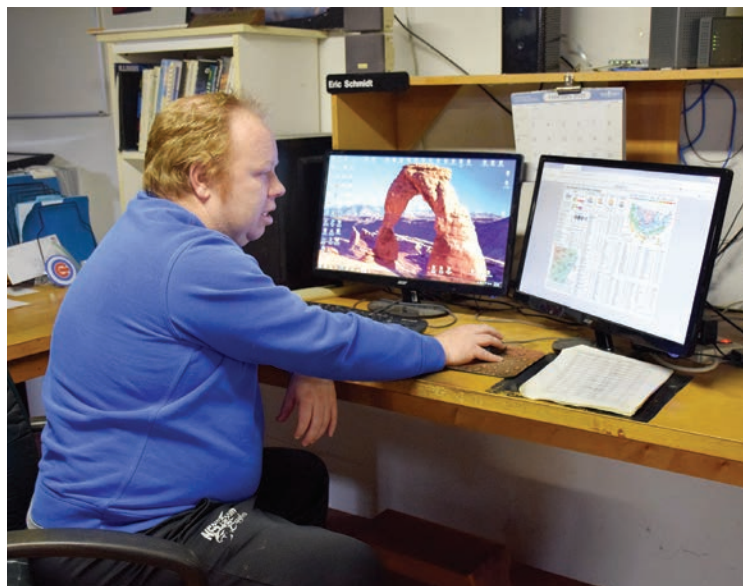
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Eric Schmidt, left, holds his father's John Campanius Holm Award, while Rein Schmidt, right, holds his recently awarded Thomas Jefferson Award.

Newton man earns National Weather Service's top honor

Marie Adamick
Effingham Magazine



Eric Schmidt looks at the different temperatures across the country on one of his work station computers in the family's basement.

The Thomas Jefferson award is given out to no more than five volunteer weather observers each year. It is the highest award the National Weather Service gives out to volunteer observers.

Rein Schmidt, 73, of Newton, earned the honor on Feb. 4, 2025.

Born and raised in Chicago, Schmidt's interest in weather started when he was in high school. He enjoyed learning about science – specifically meteorology and astronomy – while at Gordon Tech High School. It has since been renamed DePaul College Prep.

Around 1970, he began admiring local television weathermen such as Harry Volkman. Because Schmidt lived near WGN Studios, where Volkman worked, he toured the station with Volkman in 1974.

He went on to graduate from the University of Illinois – Chicago in the early 1970s with a degree in Earth Sciences, which includes meteorology, astronomy, physics and more.

In 1975, Schmidt and his wife Karen, now 71, moved from Chicago to Newton because of a job transfer. He was a graphic artist at the time, a talent which has helped him draw weather maps. After moving, Schmidt became a

National Weather Service (NWS) volunteer observer, and is still watching the weather to this day. This year marks his 50th anniversary of being a volunteer observer.

Each day, Schmidt records the high and low temperatures, precipitation and its duration and the height and depth of the Embarras River. He sends these observations to the NWS and local television stations.

The NWS collects data from observers across the country for weather averages on different websites.

He sends the weather observations to places such as Paducah, Kentucky, Romeoville and Lincoln, Illinois.

In 1978, Rein and Karen had their son, Eric, who currently lives with them.

Between 1987 and 1993, Rein was a storm spotter for WCIA Channel 3 in Champaign.

According to the NWS's website, anyone can be a NWS storm spotter. Police officers, firefighters, dispatchers, EMS workers, public utility workers and private citizens are the most common people who do it.

In the mid- to late-1990s, he was a professor at Frontier Community College in Fairfield, Illinois. He taught physics, astronomy and meteorology. He explained how temperature, pressure and humidity all involve physics. Weather maps and models both use mathematical equations.

Before moving to Newton, Rein had never experienced a tornado. He never learned to take shelter and duck-and-cover.

"We came down here, and all of a sudden had tornado warnings and all this other kind of stuff," said Rein.

The morning of June 2, 1990, the Schmidt family was picking strawberries, thinking it was just another ordinary day. There did not seem to be anything unusual in the air. That afternoon, Rein and Karen recall that it was warm, muggy and breezy. Wind gusts were between 25 and 30 miles per hour. As the afternoon passed, the wind started dying down and storm clouds began forming. At the time, the Schmidt family lived in a trailer near their neighbor's house, which was near a motel they ran.

Eric and Karen recalled the tornado sirens didn't work that day.

Being a storm spotter, Rein realized a tornado was forming near them. He reported his observation to WCIA, gathered his family and informed their neighbor. When they stepped outside, they could see the tornado in the southwest.

"It was a dark cloud with a v-shape coming down," said Rein.

His neighbor didn't know there was a tornado on the way until Rein informed her.

"By the time we went over there and told her, it was... almost on top of us, so we went to the bathroom in their house," said Rein.

The neighbor and Eric were in the bathtub. Karen was next to Rein, who had his feet pushed against the bathroom door.

"At first, we thought it kind of missed us because it was quiet. It got real quiet," said Rein. "Then all of a sudden, you hear a roaring sound coming. It got really dark, like the heavy clouds came over. Then you just heard a roar, and then you heard a bunch of noise – glass breaking."

They could hear objects being flung against the walls.

"I could feel the door buckling in. I remember pushing back at it. I could feel the door bending in," said Rein.

"There was a bathroom window there, of course, and I could see the big spin of the tornado as it was straight over us, and then it moved away," he said. "Then it got quiet again. Then we opened the bathroom door, and there was sky. You open the door, and you're outside."

The bathroom was one of the only things still left intact. The frame of the house still stood, but the roof was gone except for over the bathroom. The motel and its rooms were destroyed. The Schmidts' trailer was gone, but their detached garage still stood. However, its door was gone, and the roof was damaged.

The EF4 tornado tore through 13 miles and destroyed nine homes in and around the Newton area. According to the National Weather Service, the EF Scale ranks from 0 to 5, and it is based on estimated wind speeds and estimated damages.

"When tornado-related damage is surveyed, it is compared to a list of Damage Indicators and Degrees of Damage, which help estimate better the range of wind speeds the tornado



Left, Eric Schmidt checks their family's rain gauge in their backyard to see how much rain, if any, there was in the last 24 hours.

Right, Schmidt reads the different thermometers the family has in their backyard next to their other weather instruments: the frost depth reader and the rain gauge.

likely produced,” says the NWS website. “From that, a rating from EF0 to EF5 is assigned.”

During the cleanup, the Red Cross and people from different towns came to help. People would pile stuff up to make burn piles, and the city put out dumpsters for lost belongings that couldn't burn, like metal. The Schmidts found some of their clothes, photo albums and other belongings; they also found others' belongings, like photo albums.

Then-governor Jim Thompson traveled to Newton to assess the damage, during which Eric met him.

Surviving an EF4 tornado piqued Eric's interest in weather. In high school, he chased tornadoes throughout the Midwest and the Plains states. He traveled to Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Iowa and other parts of Illinois.

He's considered tornado chasing again but believes there's a lot already who do it.

Eric went on to graduate from Northern Illinois University with a degree in meteorology.

Since then, he went on to work as a meteorologist in Houston and then became an aviation meteorologist in Chicago before starting his own weather business in May of 2007 with his father called EJS Weather - Eric's initials.

They started their own business because Eric's meteorology department outsourced his job, and the business Rein worked for in Newton shut its doors. They had to come up with something else.

“We do weather forecast[s] for all across the country, from New York to California for different newspapers,” said Rein.

The duo gathers weather information from the NWS's web-

site and university websites; both of which have different weather models. They interpret the data from these models to come up with forecasts for different locations. That's where their meteorology skills come into play. They then send the forecasts out to newspapers across the country. All of their computers and setups are in their basement.

“We haven't had a vacation in 18 years,” said Rein.

In their backyard, they have three weather instruments. One is a rain gauge, one measures how deep frost travels in the ground and the other has various thermometers in it. Although Rein doesn't recall when he first purchased these instruments, they help Rein with his volunteer observations. He also replaces them from time to time.

In order for someone to win the Thomas Jefferson award, one must have received the John Campanius Holm award at least five years prior and still be an outstanding volunteer. To win this, observers must perform “outstanding accomplishments” in the field of weather observations, and 25 or less awards are given out annually.

According to the National Weather Service's website, the award is named after President Thomas Jefferson because he performed an almost unbroken series of observations from 1776 to 1816.

Also according to their website, Rein became the official volunteer observer at the Newton Weather Station on March 1, 1995. Since then, he's submitted his weather observations daily.

Last spring, Chuck Schaffer, a classmate of Eric's from Northern Illinois University, called to inform Rein that he won the Thomas Jefferson award and wish him congratulations. For reasons unknown to Rein, the presentation was postponed until Feb. 4 of this year.

Rein is modest about the John Campanius Holm and Thomas Jefferson awards.

“It's an honor,” said Rein.

Since surviving the 1990 tornado, the family hasn't lived through any more deadly weather.

“They're nice to watch from a distance, just not when they come over your head, rearrange your life a little bit,” said Rein.

Rein Schmidt observes different national weather maps for EJS Weather in the family's basement. His station is directly next to his son Eric's.



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Hundreds of people gathered on Feb. 22 for the Law Enforcement Torch Run Polar Plunge for Special Olympics Illinois at Lake Sara Beach.

Individuals and groups created a Plunge Page on the Special Olympics Illinois website and shared it with friends, family or on social media, explained Master of Celebration Konner Remlinger of 104.3 The Party. Then they plunged into the 33 degree water in exchange for donations to the cause.

It was Remlinger's third year both hosting and participating in Effingham's Polar Plunge. With the help of 104.3 The Party intern Bennett Green, Konner dried off quickly and rushed to the nearby tents to change.

"We love supporting Special Olympics Illinois, and it's just a fun time to get out here and get in the water," said Remlinger.

More than \$45,000 was raised.



Kimberly Stivers, left, reads out a raffle number, while Vanessa Duncan, right, gives out Polar Plunge socks to raffle winners during the post-plunge party.



The Neoga/Sigel Indians group takes the plunge dressed as Santa and his helpers.



The Life Academy group dressed in 1980s inspired clothes.



Karla Newby, 22, in her Polar Plunge hoodie after completing her first one.



Dressed as characters from "Toy Story 2" like Buzz Lightyear, Jessie and Stinky Pete, the Frozen Friends group takes the plunge.



Individual people take the plunge between groups.



Dressed as Alice in Wonderland themed costumes, the Bottoms Up! group takes the plunge.



The Heartland Coca-Cola group takes the plunge.



The Top Cop award winner Chris Thies raised over \$2,500 for plunging.



The Namaste on Ice group takes the plunge.



Heartland Dental takes the plunge.



The Puddle Jumpers group takes the plunge.



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The Berry City group takes the plunge.



The Arcola Arctic Angels group takes the plunge.



From left: Konner Remlinger, Kimberly Stivers, Vanessa Duncan and Bennett Green pose for a picture during the post-plunge party at American Legion Post 120.



Dressed in blow-up dinosaur costumes and as cave people, the Effingham County Lightning Frosty Fossils group takes the plunge.



The Sophie's Heroes group takes the plunge.



The Bananas group dressed as bananas during the Feb. 22 Polar Plunge.



The Arch Force One group dressed as an airplane.





Kimberly Stivers presents a golden plunger and a stuffed bear to the Bananas group who won best group costume during the post-plunge party.



Dressed in various costumes including Michael Myers from "Halloween" and "Cat in the Hat," the Effingham Police Department and the Effingham County Sheriff's Office take the plunge.



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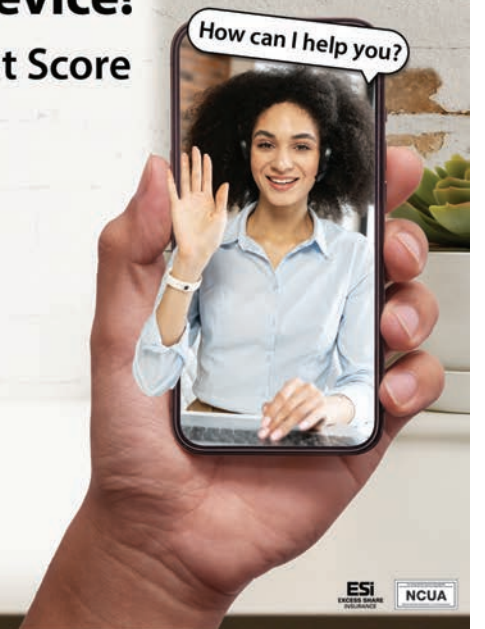
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JUMP around

**The Arena Trampoline Park
a hit with all ages**

**Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine**

Effingham residents Darren and Kate Rennels were looking for a business opportunity. With three young kids, they figured there had to be an opportunity locally for youth while at the same time giving back to the community.

For a decade, Darren Rennels was part of the mergers and acquisitions team at Heartland Dental. That job led him a couple of years ago to a doctor who owned a couple of trampoline parks in the Pacific Northwest. He began asking him questions and exploring different avenues of kids' attractions. The couple then met with 10 owners of recreational parks around the country.

"We looked at laser tag and we looked at airsoft and paintball and the go-karts, kind of all of that. We just kept coming back to the trampoline park," said Darren.

Then they began looking at the demographics and believed there were enough people in the community to support a kids' attraction, he said. They also wanted something indoors that could be open year-round.

Darren knew the community had previously supported such an indoor amusement center with Lincolnland carnival many years ago. Although it only lasted a few years, Rennels noted times have changed since he grew up. Parents tend to spend more money on recreational activities for their children.

While also looking at climbing walls that require harnesses and other attractions, they knew they needed something that would appeal to most kids since Effingham doesn't have as big of a pool of kids groups with different interests to draw from as larger cities.

"You really have to cast the net as wide as possible, which is why we came back to the trampoline," said Darren.

The Rennels began looking for a facility — one with high enough ceilings. They found a building they could lease in Effingham Business Park that was nearly double the height needed for the trampolines.

In October of last year, they opened The Arena

A girl plays in the Dodgeball area at The Arena Trampoline Park in Effingham.

Trampoline Park. They have since found it appeals to different age groups at different times. The park is open seven days a week, but mostly toddlers can be found there on weekday mornings.

“Whenever we open, there’s a whole bunch of moms who get coffee and come and drink coffee, and their kids burn off some energy every morning,” he said.

He said it also provides an opportunity for homeschooled kids and high school kids, with post-proms scheduled. The Arena is designed to serve any age group, even adults.

“We’re close to several industries, factories around here, and they come when they get off work at 2-3 in the afternoon, and they’ll go and do the Ninja Warrior course for 30 minutes and play basketball and then go home,” said Darren.

The Arena employs 20 team members and two assistant general managers to run the day-to-day operations. Darren gave up his full-time gig at Heartland to oversee operations but is very hands-on.

“I’m more on the repair side as well as just building out sys-



A kid tests his climbing skills in the soft play area.

tems and processes as things are identified that aren’t working,” he said.

The business gets feedback from customers through its point-of-sale system.

“The way it’s set up is everyone that walks through the door gets a prompt to give us a survey. We get a couple hundred surveys every single week that tell us amazing data points on what everyone really likes and what they don’t like. Then we take those complaints, and we sit down with the leadership team and say, how can we fix this? Do we need to build out different

processes? Do we need to buy different equipment? Just layer it out by importance,” said Darren. “When you get that kind of volume, there’s trends that show up pretty quickly on things that aren’t going well. So, it’s fairly easy for us to take that feedback in relatively real time. We can make the decision hey customers are saying this and by the next week can have a solution to hopefully start to mitigate that issue.”

The equipment the Rennels chose is made by the same company that builds the gymnastic equipment for the Olympics. Darren compares the equipment to a Lego set.

“You look at all the different attractions that they have —



The Arena has a variety of arcade games for kids to enjoy.

and it's hundreds — then you just start piecing together.”

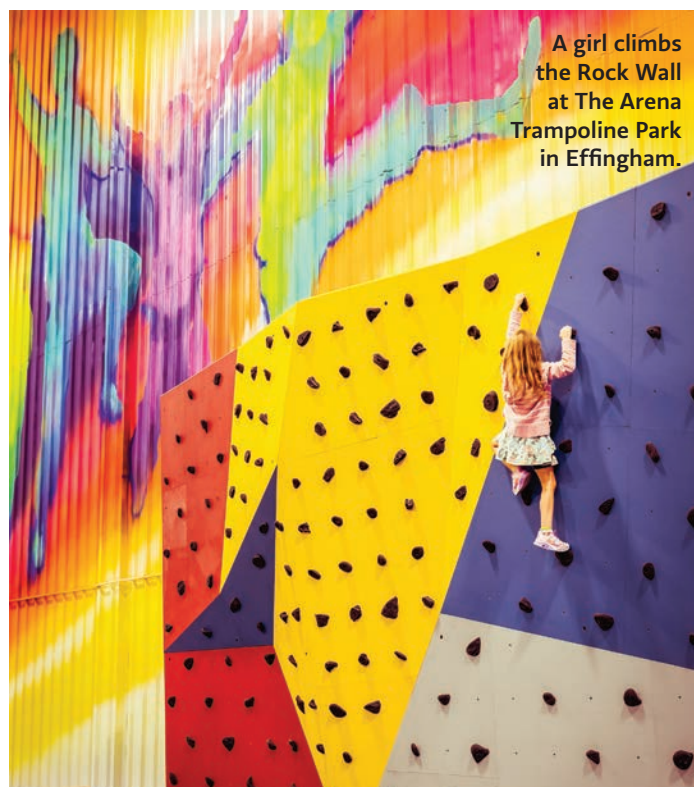
In addition to trampolines for freestyle fun, The Arena features a Ninja Course, Basketball Air Track for dunking, Soccer Air Track and soft play area for younger kids, as well as a rock wall.

When deciding which pieces to choose, the couple turned to their children, who are now 10, 8 and 6.

“It’s a little funny to invest this kind of money into something that our kids actually picked out the majority of it because of not only the color schemes but the equipment themselves because they are our core demographic,” said Darren.

He noted there was a downside to having so much input.

“They were very sick of family dinners. It was just like pestering them with questions,” he said.



A girl climbs the Rock Wall at The Arena Trampoline Park in Effingham.



Kids jump around in the trampoline freestyle area.

The kids also had input on food. The Arena has a Snack Shack that serves food kids like, such as homemade pizza, cheese sticks, corn dogs, candies and slushies.

Darren said the community has been very supportive, with more than 700 memberships. One of the reasons Darren said they wanted to set up The Arena in Effingham is its ability to pull people from outside the city as well.

“Effingham’s this kind of weird mix where you look at it on paper — only 12,258 people — but then you actually start looking at who uses Effingham is when you go to town, when you come for amenities, when you go grocery shopping, when you go out to eat, when you do anything — movies, that’s 85,000-90,000 people that are doing that,” he said.

Darren believes it’s what sets Effingham apart from other communities — and it’s more than just easy interstate access.

“I think Effingham has done a good job of positioning themselves to try and capture people when they look to leave their local communities,” he said.

Patrons have come from farther away than the Rennels had anticipated in their research before opening the park.

“We were expecting to pull for about 35 minutes (35 miles) around. That’s where we drew that circle and started looking at how many families and kids,” he said.

However, they are attracting people from outside that perimeter, routinely pulling families from Mattoon, Charleston, Sullivan, Martinsville, and an hour or more away, including Tuscola, Pana, Marshall and Mt. Vernon.

With the nearest trampoline park in Champaign, Darren said they were curious why Mattoon residents were driving to Effingham instead of Champaign, which happens to have a larger facility. In making a lot of phone calls the last few months to answer that question, Darren said they discovered something that wasn’t in their initial research.

“Effingham has a really safe community; people believe it’s safe, and it has a safe reputation where you don’t have fights and gang problems,” he said. “It really has a good reputation of just being a nice, clean place.”

Among the feedback Rennels said they have received from customers is that they want to know what’s next.

“I think the No. 1 question is what additions look like and when they are going to come,” he said.

Rennels said they built the business with growth in mind, and they can do that with the extra space in the facility they are in.

“We have identified our next several pieces that we want to add over the next couple of years,” he said.

Rennels said they hope to add one a year or so.

“We’ll have at least three more attractions, and that’s without killing off some of the Legacy attractions as we see fit,” he said.

In addition to adding attractions, Darren said they are working on developing a calendar of events that includes dedicated glow nights, where the blacklights come on, and everything glows, to a calmer pace on Sunday mornings that has less stimulation.

“More to come on that,” he said.

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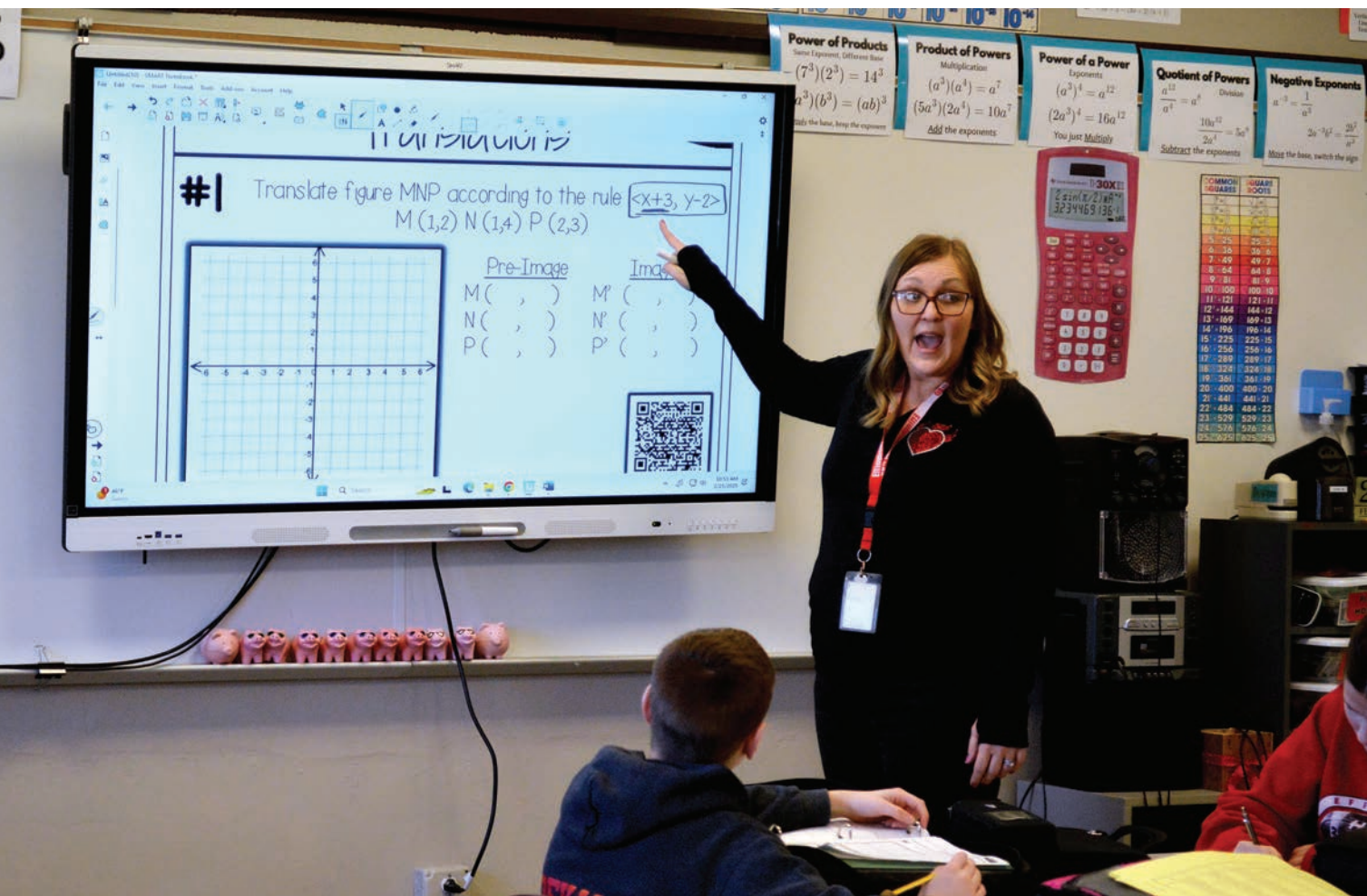
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Becky Wilson instructs eighth graders in math class at Effingham Junior High School.

EJHS educator uses songs and rhymes to teach

Governor praises her students' performance in math

Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

On any given school day, Effingham Junior High School teacher Becky Wilson sings, claps or cheers with students in her classroom. But she's not teaching music.

For two decades, Wilson has been teaching eighth-grade math. In doing so, she has amassed a book of 40 songs, cheers, rhymes and chants — even some dances — to motivate her students to learn. Some are adapted from the tunes of nursery rhymes, while others borrow from modern hits.

The technique seems to work. Her students were among other eighth graders in the state whose scores outperformed the national average in math, according to the 2024 National Report Card. However, Wilson was the one Gov. J.B. Pritzker chose to call recently to congratulate on a job well done.

"Your eighth graders and, frankly, all the eighth graders across the state of Illinois, but especially at Effingham Junior High, did an amazing job outperforming the rest of the

country on math and science NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores and I just wanted to thank you for the hard work you put in and they put in to succeed for the state of Illinois," he said. "You're crushing it."

Wilson's technique for teaching concepts stems from when she was as a student.

"I was the type of person who, when I knew I needed to memorize something or learn something, would make silly little things like that for myself," she said.

Wilson was influenced by her mother, who was a math teacher at Teutopolis High School and incorporated songs into her curriculum. Wilson recalls learning one of the songs about the Pythagorean theorem as a third grader. Wilson can still recite the song word for word: "The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two adjacent legs."

"I remember telling my third-grade teacher that, and she goes, 'Oh, so what does that mean?' and I'm like, 'I have no idea.'"

Wilson was again introduced to the melodic teaching approach in college.

"I got to go to a math conference, and I met this lady that had a bunch of math songs, and I thought that was really cool," she said.

While still in college doing practicum and student teaching, Wilson would bring some of those and sing with the kids.

She started realizing her approach was having an impression on students while coaching basketball during her first few years at EJHS.

"I remember being in basketball practice, and the kids are doing wall sits, and they would be singing some of these math songs, and I'm like, wow, that's pretty cool that they're doing this outside of the classroom," she said.

She has since learned the songs have stuck with her students beyond school.

"Old students were coming back and saying, 'I still remember that song about multiplying and dividing integers,' or they would say, 'I still know the quadratic formula song,'" she said.

Still, she admits some may find the technique silly, and Wilson's philosophy has been never to force them to join in.

"But I'm like they're in the room, even if they don't want to, it still usually gets stuck with them because they hear from other people," she said.

However, some students like it so much that they have come to her with songs of their own that she has included in her songbook. One is on dividing fractions with lyrics set to the tune of "Crank That" by Soulja Boy.

Becky Wilson has found that junior high kids still want to act like kids, have fun, and be silly.

"That's the way we do it, Ohhhh! Dividing Fractions, here we go Leave it, change it, flip it, Ohhhh!"

Wilson gets physical with the songs and cheers, adding dance moves, clapping and tapping. She correlates it to a brain break.

"You got to keep them on their toes, and it's like, OK, everybody up," she said.

A dance on slopes borrows from a 1990s dance craze hit, transforming "Macarena" into "Matharena."

"It's entertainment. It's trying to create that environment of fun, but yet we're going to learn what we need to learn," she said.

It's in that necessity Wilson finds her inspiration for new songs.

The cheers, for example, come from times when Wilson feels like she's repeating herself to students.

"I'm like, you have to know this, and so then I would kind of put it to a cheer or a rhyme or a chant or just something that kind of gets stuck in their head," she said.

That worked a couple of years ago when students had trouble labeling correctly.

"You're finding area, you're finding radius, you're finding volume. They couldn't ever label correctly, and I'm like, the only thing that matters is that the area is always squared. Volume is always cubed," she said.

A student claps along with Becky Wilson to one of the chants she uses to help students learn.



That turned into “area is always squared, volume is always cubed” while clapping a beat, she said. Now, when Wilson says the first part of the chant, students automatically respond with, “Volume is always cubed.”

Wilson also incorporates songs from others in her classroom.

Last year, she showed her students a YouTube video with a song about the four quadrants. Kids then asked if they could make a video. They made one using the song but with their own actions.

Wilson has made other short videos and showed them to her classes the following year, which she said helps them buy into the learning method.

“They’re like, ‘Oh, those kids are doing it,’” she said.

While Wilson has no desire to reach a wider audience, like on TikTok, her work has caught on to other educators, which she discovered when a friend who teaches in Dieterich School District told her several years ago she saw Mrs. Wilson’s Songbook in the teacher’s lounge.

“I was like, oh, my gosh. I wonder how it got there. That was kind of a cool thing,” she said.

Second-year EJHS teacher Jill Feldhake also has a copy of the songbook and has started using some of the songs. While she has seen such songs on the Internet, she usually has to scour for a particular one related to the concept she is teaching at the time.

“Hers is probably, I would say, a unique collection,” she said. “When I’m teaching a new concept, I pull up the document she sent me and search through it first and say, ‘Oh yeah, I like this. I can use this.’”

She has found the songs stick with the kids months after

learning them.

“Something that I taught them in September has now re-surfaced a little bit, and I’m like, remember ‘if the signs are both the same...’ and all I say is half of it, and they can finish the rest of it, and they know the rule,” she said. “If it clicks, it sticks.”

She has even found that for students who aren’t as enthusiastic about the method.

“Sometimes, kids are like, ‘Oh, this is silly. This is crazy. I’m not doing that.’ But, oftentimes, those kids will still be mouthing the words, and they know the words. It’s just sometimes they’re not always into the buy-in of participating in class, which is OK,” she said.

Wilson notes her teaching style is common at the elementary level, but she has found that junior high kids still want to act like kids, have fun, and be silly.

“So, I’m like, why not sing, and if it can get something they need to remember stuck in their head, then that’s a win-win,” she said.

In her downtime, Feldhake said she can hear Wilson, whose classroom is next door, singing or doing a chant.

“I love it actually. She’s into it. She’s active. It’s her style. It’s who she is outside the classroom. She’s fun-loving all the time in everything she does, and it really is just her personality shining through in her teaching style.”

Wilson said she doesn’t want to act like what she does is the best and only way, but with her personality, it works for her.

“It’s nice for Effingham to get some recognition, but also, there’s so many good teachers that do cool stuff, and this is just what I do,” she said.

Becky Wilson points out a shape on the HSHS Prairie Heart Institute/outpatient entrance in Effingham.



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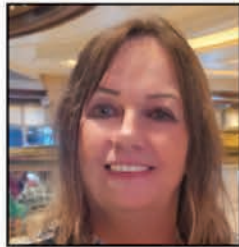
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Patients struggle with lack of consistent coverage for popular weight-loss drugs

Story
Tom Murphy
AP Health Writer

Photo
Jeff Chiu/AP Photo

Supplies of high-demand obesity treatments are improving, but that doesn't mean it's easier to get them.

Many employers and insurers are scaling back coverage of Wegovy and Zepbound and a key government program, Medicare, doesn't cover the drugs for obesity. Meanwhile, some big employers are adding coverage, but their commitment isn't guaranteed.

Treatment prices that can top hundreds of dollars monthly even after discounts make it hard for many people to afford these drugs on their own. That can make the life-changing weight loss that patients seek dependent on the coverage they have and how long it lasts.

Coverage complications are not unusual in the U.S. health care system. But the challenge is magnified for these obesity treatments because a wide swath of the population could be eligible to take them, and patients have to stay on the drugs to keep the weight off.

"There are a lot of people right now who want access to the medication and can't get it," said Katherine Hempstead, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation senior policy adviser.

Coverage varies depending on who pays the bill

Paul Mack dropped about 70 pounds after he started taking Wegovy. The Redwood City, California, resident said food noise — constant thoughts of eating — faded, and he was able to have a heart procedure.

Paul Mack poses for a portrait in Redwood City, Calif., Monday, Feb. 10, 2025.



The treatment was covered by California's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal. Then the 50-year-old security guard got a raise. He no longer qualified for Medi-Cal and lost coverage of the drug for several months starting last summer.

He regained two pants sizes.

"I couldn't control the eating," he said. "All the noise came back."

Coverage of these drugs remains patchy more than a year after Zepbound entered the market to challenge Wegovy.

The benefits consultant Mercer says 44% of U.S. companies with 500 or more employees covered obesity drugs last year. It's even more common with bigger employers.

More than a dozen government-funded Medicaid programs for people with low incomes also cover obesity treatments.

But few insurers cover the drugs on individual insurance marketplaces. And some plans restrict their coverage with things like requests for prior authorization or pre-approval.

The lack of Medicare coverage remains a concern as well, especially for people who retire and move to the government-funded program from employer-sponsored coverage.

"Patients come to us terrified about switching to Medicare and losing coverage," said Dr. Katherine Saunders, an obesity expert at Weill Cornell Medicine and cofounder of the obesity treatment company FlyteHealth. "We start talking about backup plans a year before they transition."

Cost and uncertain payoff loom as concerns

Philadelphia-area insurer Independence Blue Cross dropped coverage of the drugs solely for weight loss for some customers starting this year. Company officials say the insurer worried about premium hikes it would have to impose on all customers if it continued.

Cost also was a factor in decisions by West Virginia and North Carolina officials to end similar programs that provided coverage for state employees.

These concerns make Vanderbilt University researcher Stacie Dusetzina wonder how long employers who have added coverage will keep it, now that the drugs are no longer in short supply.

"That's probably going to spike spending," said Dusetzina, a health policy professor who studies drug costs.

Drugmakers tout the savings these drugs can provide by improving patient health and warding off future serious medical conditions like heart attacks or strokes.

But health care experts note that there are no guarantees that the employer or insurer who covers the drug will eventually reap those benefits because people may change jobs or insurers.

Will coverage ever become consistent?

There's no clear path toward widespread coverage of these drugs for obesity, even as polls show Americans favor having Medicaid and Medicare cover the costs.

Leaders at Zepbound maker Eli Lilly have seen coverage grow steadily for their drug, and they're optimistic that will continue.

Former President Joe Biden's administration proposed a rule that would allow for Medicare and broader Medicaid coverage. Its fate remains uncertain in President Donald Trump's administration.

A bill calling for Medicare coverage has been floating around Congress for years. But it isn't scheduled for a vote.

Drugmakers are currently testing several addi-

tional obesity treatments. Such potential competition could reduce prices and prompt more coverage.

Patchy coverage complicates treatment plans

Dr. Amy Rothberg says the lack of consistent coverage leaves her conflicted about writing prescriptions because she's not sure how long patients will be able to take the drug.

"We know from the studies that people go off these medications, they regain their weight," said Rothberg, director of the University of Michigan's weight-management program. "I don't want to do harm."

Some insurers require diet and exercise changes for the patient before they will cover a weight-loss medication. Those changes should happen in conjunction with starting the medicine, said Dr. Lydia Alexander, president of the Obesity Medicine Association.

She's also seen requirements for a body mass index of 40 or more, which equates to severe obesity, before coverage can start.

"We're saying that obesity is a disease, but we're not treating it like a disease," she said.

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Effingham & Area Events



March 28

The Drifters, The Platters & Cornell Gunter's Coasters. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Discovery Christian School Annual Bingo Fundraiser. Enjoy Joe's Pizza Food, bingo games, live and silent auction, 50/50 raffle and more! Doors open 5 p.m. Dinner at 5:30 p.m. Games at 6:30 p.m. Event at Christ's Church in Effingham. For questions, email treasurer@discoverychristianschool.org

March 28 & 29

Class Pack Car Club Show at the Cross County Mall in Mattoon, IL.

March 29

Benefit for Walker and Rosie Memorial Fun Park at Teutopolis Banquet Hall from 4 p.m. to Midnight. Dinner 5 to 7 p.m. (free will Donation), live auction at 7 p.m., entertainment by Bryor Rhodes Band after auction. Proceeds go toward the Walker and Rosie Memorial Fund Park in Beecher City. The park is in memory of Walker and Rosie, two young children who lost their lives in the anhydrous ammonia leak accident in Teutopolis in September 2023.

March 30

EARS Bingo Brunch. Doors open 10:30

a.m. Brunch and bingo 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., all at Village Wine in Effingham. Brunch buffet catered by Don Pedro's.

April 5

Lake Sara Dam Run at 9352 East Park Ave., Effingham, IL. Half marathon 7 a.m. 8 Mile Run at 8 a.m. 5K Walk & Run at 9 a.m. Virtual also! Proceeds support Special Olympics Illinois. For info, text or call Ruth at 217-254-9178, Pat at 217-343-6971 or Katie at 217-821-3341. Free food and drink for participants! Pizza, subs, chips, fruit, bagels, DQ Dilly Bars & Effingham County Porkburgers! Post party at The Nest Tavern at the Cardinal Golf Course, Effingham.

BlackHawk. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 6

Spring Craft & Vendor Show at Thelma Keller Convention Center 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 80+ booths to shop from. Gift card giveaways.

April 10-13

"Disney's Newsies" Musical presented by Newton Community High School Choral and Theater Department.

April 11

Bunny Bash in Downtown Effingham. Each downtown business will have eggs hidden in their store with various coupons or promos. Starts 9 a.m.

Randy Travis: The More Life Tour and the Original Randy Travis Band with Guest Vocalist James Dupre. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 12

Easter Egg Hunt starting 10 a.m. at Evergreen Nursing and Rehab in Effingham. For more info, call 217-347-7121.

Easter Egg Hunt at the Cross County Mall in Mattoon, IL.

Mattoon Made Artisan Fair starting 10 a.m. at Heritage Park in Mattoon, IL.

Great White & Slaughter. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 18

Scary Poppins Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. Contact winery for tickets and more info.

April 25

EPC Idol Finals. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 26

Cancer Survivor Breakfast. All cancer survivors (anyone currently battling or has previously battled cancer) are invited to come along with one caregiver to a FREE breakfast



MEET THE TEAM

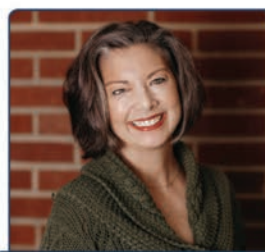
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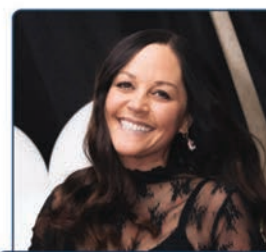
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at the Effingham VFW. Call Becky Kinman at 217-821-5487 with any questions.

5K Run/Walk For Life at Dacey Trail in Forest Park in Shelbyville. 7 a.m. check in/late registration with 8 a.m. start. Prayer Walk to follow. This run supports the FREE services offered at the Family Life Center. Register at 605 Eden Ave., Effingham, IL. For event questions, call Linda Spindler at 217-342-5433 or email development@familylifepcc.org

Mini Golf Fundraiser at Effingham Event Center from 5 to 9 p.m. Happy hour at 5 p.m. Ticket includes two rounds of golf, four drink tickets, food and entry into a drawing. Contact Ed or Leslie Kemme at 217-821-3445 or 217-821-3399. Fundraiser for St. Mary's Shumway Parish Hall.

April 30

Hat Burning Fundraiser for LeAnn's Light. 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Tuscan Hills Winery in Effingham. Create a hat that's 100% your own at this hands-on DIY hat branding event. Choose your hat, design your pattern and burn it in yourself to make a true masterpiece. With over 200 stencils available (or the option to freehand your design), your hat will be one-of-a-kind. Fun for adults and kids! A portion of the wine sales during the event will also be donated to LeAnn's Light!

May 2, 3 & 4

Mother's Day Gift & Craft Show at Cross County Mall in Mattoon, IL.

May 3

Unit 40 Mentoring Program Trivia Night Fundraiser at Effingham Event Center in Effingham, IL. Doors open 6 p.m. Contest begins 7 p.m. Kentucky Derby theme. Prizes for best decorated table, best team name and best costume! \$1,000 raffle. Food & beverages available for purchase. Proceeds to benefit the Effingham Unit 40 Mentoring Program. Trivia is not limited to just Kentucky Derby-themed questions.

BoomBox all 80's Pop/Rock Band at A1 Liquors on Highway 33 in Effingham at 7 p.m.

May 5

Anne Wilson at the Effingham County Fairgrounds in Altamont. Also includes James Carothers and Laila Smith Music. Gates open 5 p.m. Show begins 6:15 p.m. Proceeds benefit Convoys at the Crossroads.

May 9 & 10

Boutique Blvd In the Rural King Event Center in Mattoon, IL.

Mother's Day Market in downtown Effingham. Make & take for kids to do with moms, store specials, specialty drinks and more!

May 10

5K Run/Walk For Life Event at Trek Trail in Effingham with the start/finish at Effingham Performance Center. 7 a.m. check in/late registration with 8 a.m. start. Prayer Walk to follow. This run supports the FREE services offered at the Family Life Center. Register at 605 Eden Ave., Effingham, IL. For event questions, call Linda Spindler at 217-342-5433 or email development@familylifepcc.org

Jeremy Camp: These Days Tour. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

May 30

Wreckless Whiskey Band from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. at Tuscan Hills Winery in Effingham.

May 31

Masonic Lodge Auction for Shriners Hospitals For Children starts 10 a.m. at Charley Brown Park Fairgrounds in Flora, IL. All proceeds will help support life-changing specialized pediatric healthcare provided by the Shriners Hospital for Children. To make a donation to the auction, call 618-843-3815. Checks and money orders can be made out to Shriners Hospital and mailed to Don Fry, 323 East 4th St., Flora, IL 62839.

May 31

Scott Wattles & The Blue Suede Crew. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

June 6, 7 & 8

Flea Market at the Cross County Mall in Mattoon, IL.

June 7

Magic and Mischief: A Fairy Market at 112 E. Section Ave. in Effingham from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. Free event. Magical street performers, live fairies, DJ music, face painting, 50+ fairy vendors, food vendors and more!

Jo Dee Messina. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

June 19, 20, 21 & 22

Moccasin Creek Festival at Lake Sara, Effingham, IL. Suzy Bogguss, Sister Sadie, John Moreland and two dozen more bands!

June 14

Father's Day Car Show at Evergreen Nursing in Effingham. Free admission. Starts 10 a.m. Awards at 2 p.m. Food trucks, vendors, music. For more info, call 217-460-9450.



Kyle Lewis of the Tackle My Meat barbecue team prepares tastings during the 2022 EffinghamHAM-JAM Hometown Throwdown competition.

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July 11

Relay for Life 2025 Effingham County 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Teutopolis Community Park.

July 18

EffingHAM-JAM 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.: Big Things in Effingham – bring the kids downtown to experience some big things!, HAM CITY JAM Demo local skate competition; 5 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.: Food trucks, vendors & beer tent; 5:30 until sold out: Hometown Throwdown Amateur BBQ Challenge with blind judging by local community reps, Hometown Throwdown Sponsors and KCBS professional judges; 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Cowboy Space Western Folk Rock Band "The Troubadours."

July 26-Aug. 2

Effingham County Fair at the Fairgrounds in Altamont, IL.

Aug. 3

We The Kingdom. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Aug. 20

Happy Together Show 2025. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7:30 p.m. www.theepc.org

Sept. 27

Schutzenfest at Effingham County Fairgrounds in Altamont. Strangers with Kandi play at 8 p.m.

Oct. 26

Colin Mochrie & Brad Sherwood. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Nov. 30

All I Want for Christmas Craft & Vendor Show at Thelma Keller Convention Center in Effingham. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free entry. 80+ booths to shop from. Free pictures with Santa!

Dec. 6

Holiday Vendor Market at West End Event Center in Newton, IL starting at 9 a.m.



2023 Junior Miss Effingham County Fair Queen Kinze Polk, left, and 2023 Miss Effingham County Fair Queen Paige Wendling, right, wave to the crowd at the Effingham County Fairgrounds during the demolition derby.



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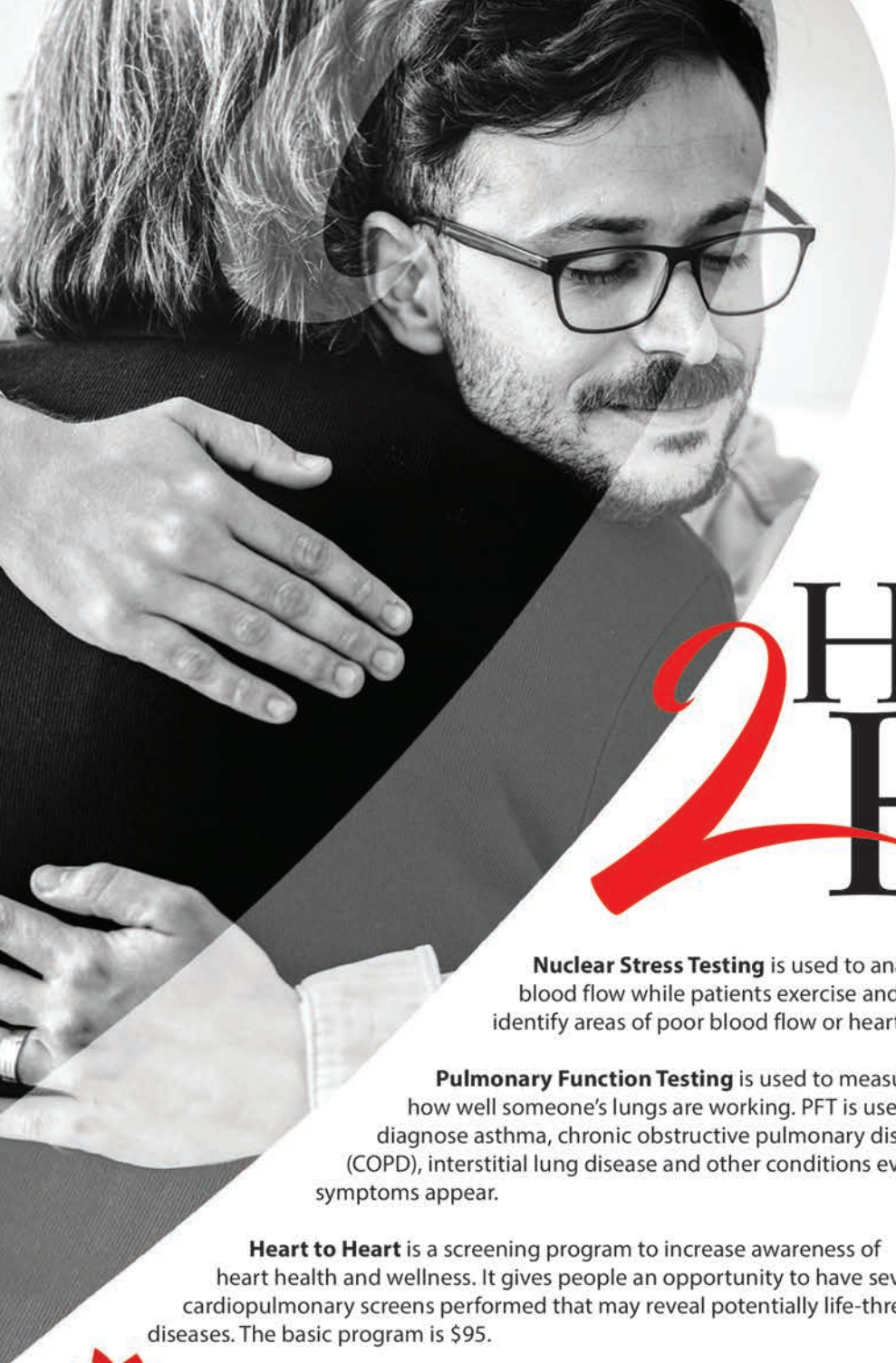
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