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EFFINGHAM

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MAGAZINE

FEATURE STORY



Some of the "Quest" cast rehearse a "Bowendir's Castle" scene. From left: Johanna Stice, Krystle Starr, Kent Wolf, Erica Hollinshead-Stead, Eveyne Stead, Wilson Walk and Tristan Wolf. Marie Adamick photo

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ON THE COVER: Krista Phillips is crowned 2026 Miss Illinois County Fair Queen. Studio 131 Photography

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Blessings in a Backpack is a national nonprofit organization that supplies easy-to-prepare, kid-friendly food to students in the free and reduced meal program, helping ensure they have enough food over the weekend. The local chapter began in Effingham in 2013, serving 130 students across three schools.

Today, about 430 students at all Unit 40 schools receive the bags discreetly.

Cathy Griffith writes about the program in this edition of Effingham Magazine. On a recent Tuesday evening, Cathy watched as packaged food zoomed down an assembly line at Kirby Foods in Effingham, as the Effingham High School Lady Hearts Track and Field team packed plastic bags with mac and cheese, pudding, ramen noodles, mandarin oranges, oatmeal packets, granola bars and canned spaghetti. In all, they filled 756 bags with each of the seven food items in 40 minutes.

Keagyn Koenig of the EHS track team was amazed as she looked at the wall of finished totes.

“I didn’t know there were that many students who need food,” she said.

Neither did we. Blessings in a Backpack is a blessing in itself.

In his own way, so is Deputy Dale. He’s the therapy dog of the Effingham County Sheriff’s Office. Marie Adamick tagged along on one of his visits to area schools with his handler, School Resource Officer Chris Greuel.

“He’s pretty good at handling all sorts of inputs from people, all sorts of stress levels and how they approach him. He handles them all very well,” said Greuel. “He gets clobbered pretty much as soon as he gets to the school, so we try to keep kids from crowding him too much. But he does so well with it. I’m impressed by how well he does with it, to be honest.”

Sheriff Paul Kuhns was wary about taking on a therapy dog. But since Deputy Dale came aboard in 2023, the sheriff is one of his biggest fans.

“It’s a barrier breaker because when people see Dale, they’re not scared so much anymore,” said Kuhns. “Maybe they don’t talk to the police officers so much, but they want to talk to Dale, and they want to pet him and they want to look at him and rub his ears.”

Elsewhere, we visit with the 2026 Miss Illinois County Fair Queen, Effingham’s own Krista Phillips.

“It’s been crazy, but it’s been awesome, too,” she said. “I’m excited for the summer.”

That’s when she will visit 30 county fairs across the state, not to mention preside at the Illinois State Fair. It’s a dream she has been chasing since she was young – the culmination of years of pageant competition.

By the time this edition is published, Marie Adamick will have made her appearance on stage in the FACE production “Quest! One Play to Rule Them All.” She shares her experiences preparing for the play in these pages. Break a leg, Marie.

Those stories and more make up your spring 2026 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 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 25 years in news and magazine publications. She is a lifelong resident of Effingham, where she resides with her husband, Tim, and daughter, Leah.

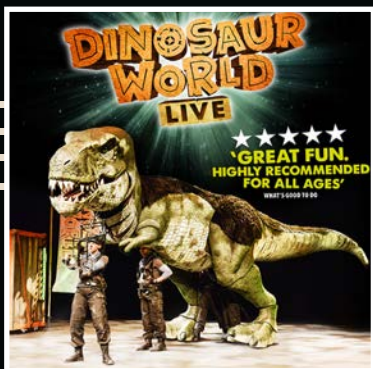
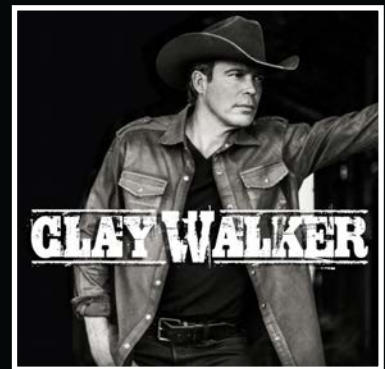
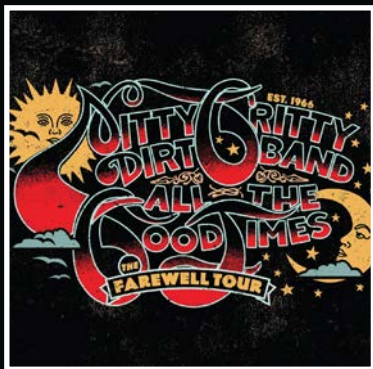
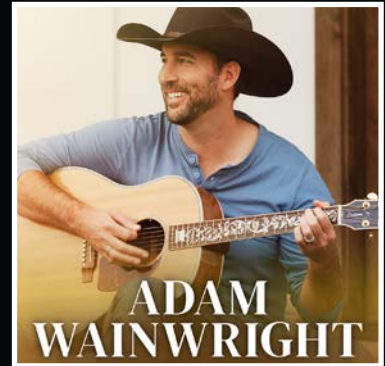
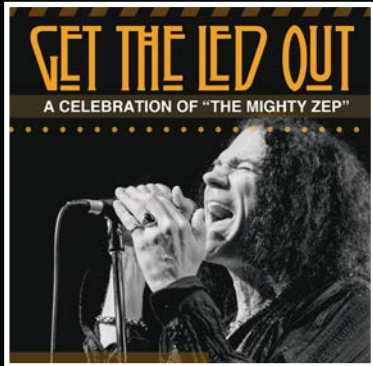


Marie Adamick is a general assignment reporter at the Effingham Daily News. Before deciding to major in journalism, she considered majoring in international business or chemistry. She graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 2024 with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and a minor in History. A greater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



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Blessings IN A BACKPACK

‘I like to see the
impact it makes’

Story and photos
Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

On a recent Tuesday evening, packaged food zoomed down an assembly line at Kirby Foods in Effingham, as the Effingham High School Lady Hearts Track and Field team packed plastic bags with mac and cheese, pudding, ramen noodles, mandarin oranges, oatmeal packets, granola bars and canned spaghetti.

In all, they filled 756 bags with each of the seven food items in 40 minutes. The bags were flung into totes, each one labeled with an Effingham Unit 40 school.

It was Keagyn Koenig's first time packing with the EHS track team. She was amazed as she looked at the wall of finished totes.

“I didn’t know there were that many students who need food,” she said.

Blessings in a Backpack is a national nonprofit organization that supplies easy-to-prepare, kid-friendly food to students in the free and reduced meal program, helping ensure they have enough food over the weekend. The local chapter began in Effingham in 2013, serving 130 students across three schools.

Today, about 430 students at all Unit 40 schools receive the bags discreetly.

The food is purchased with money raised locally and assembled into bags by volunteers every two weeks. It’s then delivered to schools and distributed to students every Friday.

Casey Burgholzer, a member of the Blessings in a Backpack Board, led the recent packing

EHS Lady Hearts Track and Field team assemble bags of food for Blessings in a Backpack to go to Effingham Unit 40 schools.





session. It was her fifth one this year.

Burgholzer joined the nonprofit nine years ago when she was looking for something to get involved in.

“I just felt like I was at that point in my life where I could donate time. And this was an opportunity to do it,” she said.

Her sister was on the Blessings in a Backpack Board, so she also joined. While her sister is no longer on the board, Burgholzer said it would be hard to walk away now.

“I like to see the impact it makes on the community, and that’s nice,” she said.

Impact is also why Blessings in a Backpack Board member Ryan Fearday has stayed with the organization for nine years. Although he and other volunteers can’t see the program’s direct impact on students and families since distribution is discreet, he notes helping at packing sessions, like the recent one, shows the program’s value.

“Whenever you line up someone’s food on a table like this, that’s all going out to the kids,” he said.

The organization buys food with funds raised through donations and fundraisers. But as

Blessings in a Backpack Board member Casey Burgholzer grabs bags to place in totes during a recent packing session.

Effingham High School Lady Hearts Track and Field team members help assemble bags of food for Blessings in a Backpack at Kirby Foods warehouse in Effingham.



Totes filled with bags of food from Blessings in a Backpack are stacked at Kirby Food warehouse in Effingham. Each tote is labeled with an Effingham Unit 40 school it will go to.

inflation has risen, so has the price of food, making it more challenging to buy enough to feed that many students. Blessings receives help from Kirby Foods in navigating that.

“They help us with cost and figuring out what is cost-effective,” said Fearday, noting that, in addition to using their facility, Kirby also has someone from their staff help during packing sessions.

“They had all the food set up for us when we got here,” said Fearday. “Kirby does a fantastic job.”

Burgholzer points out that a lot of work goes into the program, not just from Blessings in a Backpack but also from the schools.

“I know it's kind of an undertaking for them to coordinate with us. We appreciate them, too, of course, working together because it's a huge system that has to work together,” she said.

School Counselor Kristin Koerner helps coordinate the distribution of the bags at South Side School, where about 100 first- and second-graders currently receive food from the program. That number fluctuates throughout the year.

Although the school decides who qualifies for Blessings in a Backpack based on income guidelines, Koerner noted anyone seeking help will not be turned away.

“If there's a family that has the need or a situa-

tion arises where they could use extra support and resources, we do provide it,” she said.

According to Koerner, the weekend food is vital for many families in the area.

“I've had several family members reach out asking for the bags and to make sure that they're going to get them,” she said.

“I think that for several of them, this is reassuring and can reduce some of that stress that they may be feeling that comes from other financial concerns that they're running into.”

The plastic white bags are placed in the classrooms every Friday and hung on hooks. Students can then put the bags in their backpacks when they arrive.

At Effingham Junior High School, staff have changed how they hand out bags, so students feel more at ease taking them without being noticed. Last year, the school set up a pantry in the basement, where students can not only get the food but also other items such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant and clothing. Wendling said students can go into the pantry and take what they need when they need it without permission. Bags are available to slide the items in.

“We were just trying to figure out what's the best way to get it to the kids that really need it



in the most discreet way we can,” said Student Services Counselor Britt Wendling.

Since word about the pantry has spread, Wendling said the school has received donations from churches and individuals. Catholic Charities’ Second Hand Rose in Teutopolis has supplied clothing for the pantry, whether it’s for school changes, replacements for outgrown items or warm clothes.

“We’ve had kids that have had house fires, and they’ve (Second Hand Rose) provided us with a good amount of things for them to take home and rebuild their wardrobe,” said Wendling.

The pantry also includes school supplies like binders, which Wendling said often run low because students can’t bring their backpacks to class.

The pantry comes as the district has ended its

free and reduced meal program for all students this school year. The program is still in place for those who qualify.

“I think for families that were just kind of on the edge, it’s made it more difficult. It’s an expense that they weren’t dealing with before that they’re having to,” said Wendling. “I’ve talked to some families where that does make a difference.”

Wendling pointed out that as prices go up and things get harder to afford, Blessings in a Backpack has become a valuable safety net for kids and families.

“The value of being able to provide a

meal, which students are able to prepare for themselves, can’t be overstated,” she said.

Blessings in a Backpack is always in need of volunteers. To volunteer, email effinghambackpack@gmail.com.

EHS Assistant Track Coach Jeni Phillips moves bags of food for Blessings in a Backpack.

“If there’s a family that has the need or a situation arises where they could use extra support and resources, we do provide it.”

— Kristin Koerner, South Side School counselor

'Everyone means everything to me'



Jill Spour helps student Davin Worman with his design of a skateboard wheel during her CAD class at Teutopolis High School. Cathy Griffith photo

Teutopolis High School teacher inspires students

Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

Jill Spour didn't know what she wanted to do after high school. Until she signed up for an AutoCAD class and fell in love with it. "I came home, and I said, 'Mom, I think I know what I want to go to college for. I want to be an architect,'" Spour recalled. "And she goes, 'Do you know how many architects are in Effingham County?'"

In the late 1990s, Spour said there weren't many. She didn't want to move away from home, so she studied civil engineering instead. But as she took more AutoCAD classes in college, she discovered another love: teaching. Spour found herself helping other students, especially older ones who were going back to school.

"They all knew that I was really quick at the AutoCAD stuff,

so they would always come up and be like, 'Hey, how did you do this?' So it was just something that came very easily to me," she said.

Spour would eventually discover that she could combine her two passions while staying in the area.

After college, Spour got a teaching job at Stewardson-Stras-

burg School District. However, four years later, fears of job cuts and her daughter's health led her to accept a job at GE in Mattoon. But when the GE facility closed, Spour returned to her passion.

"I like being in the classroom with the kids. I like seeing the moment when the kids finally grasp onto something, and they're like, oh, that's pretty cool," she said.

Now an Industrial Arts teacher at Teutopolis High School, Spour instructs the Make-It Manufacturing class. She also teaches AutoCAD, 3-D Modeling, and more. Some of the classes are dual credit with Lake Land College.

For the past few years, Spour has taken her students outside the classroom and given them an inside look at careers in the industry. One of the places she has done that is at Stevens Industries, the largest manufacturer of commercial casework and architectural millwork in the United States, in Teutopolis. The collaboration has led to job opportunities for students with the company. Many interns at Stevens are from Spour's classes, and some have landed full-time jobs.

"We started out just kind of having a couple interns, and as we discovered how good they were coming from her, we decided, well, we'll just add a couple more, then a couple more, and it's just kind of really grown from there," said Stevens Tal-



Jill Spour, far left, poses with the robotics team of 2025. From left are Hildi Niemerg, Olivia Spour, Natalia Carpintero, Oliver Lee, Ben Esker and Jake Doedtman. Submitted photo



George Habing, left, and Will Hewing work on projects during Teutopolis High School CAD class. Submitted photo



Jill Spour instructs student Gus Niemerg during CAD class. On his desk is a 3-D sculpture of Marvel's Thanos that he created. Cathy Griffith photo

Inman Wendt gets help from teacher Jill Spour in designing a skateboard wheel during CAD class at Teutopolis High School. Cathy Griffith photo



2025 Teutopolis High School CAD class.

ent Acquisition and Development Manager Sarah Zerrusen.

According to Zerrusen, what makes her students good is their ability to keep up with full-time employees.

“A lot of times, you think of interns as maybe a lower level, but the students that she sends over to us are right along with our full-time employees and are able to do the exact same things, which is great,” she said.

Zerrusen said Spour is helping to fill a gap in the community of workers with that skill set.

“If you look at a majority of manufacturer and engineering companies, you will see a lot of us have openings in CAD drafters,” she said.

Craig Greuel would never have thought to pursue a career as a CAD technician if it weren't for Spour.

Coming from a family of carpenters, Greuel developed an interest in woodworking. While taking a Construction class at Stewardson-Strasburg High School, he noticed 3-D printers and a laser engraver in the nearby Industrial Arts classroom.

"I took every chance I got to either print things that I found online or laser engrave parts of my woodworking projects," he said.

Seeing that, Spour recommended he take her CAD class. That led to his interest in 3-D modeling/design.

As Greuel and other students became more interested in her program, the school bought a bigger industrial engraver and additional shop equipment. Spour asked Greuel to set up the new laser engraver. He spent a couple of months working on it, both in class and outside of it.

"By my senior year, I had basically convinced most of my other teachers to allow me to skip their classes and make up their coursework in order to spend more time in the shop/Industrial Arts room for CAD/Construction II projects," he said.

When Greuel chose to further his education at Lake Land College, Spour advised him on the college's programs and courses. Today, Greuel is a CAD technician at Stevens Industries' Millwork Engineering Department.

Stevens Millwork Outsource Coordinator Lance Lankow wasn't sure about his career path before his senior year. That changed when he took Spour's CAD class.

"She was very helpful, guiding me and other students one step at a time through the ins and outs of the engineering world. She would spend time explaining an issue you may be facing, while also making the classroom lighthearted and fun," he said.

Spour said she tries to make the projects fun for students. She believes they learn better and are more likely to try new things when they enjoy what they're doing. In her CAD class, they make cookie cutters in any shape they want, then go to the food room to bake cookies with them. In another class, she might have them draw a vehicle of their choice.

It's what Tyler Petersen liked about her classes.

"She allows people to work at their own pace, and people can work on their own personal projects," said Petersen, who is now an intern at Stevens. He uses AutoCAD to draw floor plans that show cabinet locations for the wood and laminate manufacturer.

Spour does what she can to help her students succeed. Because her students can't just take their projects home to work on, she has an open-door policy from the time she arrives at 7:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"I tell my kids that in my class, if you don't get an A, it's because you didn't let me try to help you," she said.

Spour wants to make sure her students not only know how to do something but also understand it.

"And it makes it so much easier for them to grasp when we walk through step-by-step, and then they're like, 'Oh, that was easy,'" she said.

Spour pushes her students to think critically. She encourages them to come up with creative, outside-the-box ideas for various projects. For one such project, students must design

hydraulic arms that can pick up a soda can and place it on a shelf.

Spour likes challenging her students, but she also loves challenging herself. One example is the Make-It Manufacturing class, where she designs the curriculum. The class allows students to work with various machines. They get to use CNCs, mills, laser engravers, and ABB robots, which Spour had to train on.

"They get to learn how to run the mill. They get to learn how to run the CNC. I basically try to keep it open to where the students say, 'I want to learn this.' I'm like, good, let's learn that. And then maybe somebody else is like, 'I like more of the coding side.' I'm like, OK, let's learn how to code the robot," she said.

She said the class, which will be open to any school district in Effingham County next school year, has opened up more opportunities for students – opportunities she didn't have when she graduated from high school.

"I wasn't really 100% sure what there really was to offer in the manufacturing world, in the design world. It took me many different steps to get where I am. And I want kids to know there are opportunities out there," she said. "I want them to see some of those opportunities so they can test them out and figure out what they really enjoy, because going to work and not loving your job would be horrible."

Spour believes her purpose is to help guide students, whom she thinks of as her own kids.

"I have hundreds of kids because everyone means everything to me," she said.



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Some of the “Quest” cast rehearse a “Bowendir’s Castle” scene. From left: Johanna Stice, Krystle Starr, Kent Wolf, Erica Hollinshead-Stead, Eveyne Stead, Wilson Walk and Tristan Wolf.

A *Quest* for Community Theater

Joining a FACE production



Story and photos
Marie Adamick
Effingham Magazine

In mid-January, I saw a Facebook post for auditions being held by FACE - Fine Arts, County of Effingham - for “Quest! One Play to Rule Them All.” I had always wanted to join a play and be part of theater. Plus, it’s inspired by “Lord of the Rings,” so I couldn’t pass up that opportunity. I’ve been a fan of Middle Earth since middle school.

I was nervous about auditioning because I imagined reading a scene from the script on stage in front of the directors. Instead, it was a table-read. Those wanting to audition were assigned a character, and we read through the prologue. We did that a few times, and almost everyone who auditioned made it in.

At first, I wasn’t sure if I could commit to rehearsals and the show days due to a previous commitment, so I missed the first few weeks of rehearsals. It worked out because a few of

the rehearsals were canceled due to snow, and Director Leslie Jenkins found not one, not two, but three roles for me.

I told him that my job as a reporter for the Effingham Daily News does not have set hours, so I might miss some rehearsals or be late. As long as I communicated with him about any absences, Jenkins was understanding.

Rehearsals are Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the Village Square Mall. Before the stage was fully constructed, we had been practicing on two-thirds of it that had been built. That made for some interesting positioning. The full stage has since been built, including props, marks of where to stand when and scenery.

Most rehearsals involve the cast rehearsing through the play one time, with small tweaks that Jenkins and Assistant Director Sara Ruding give to the actors. Sometimes, we don’t start rehearsal at the beginning of the play, but we almost always practice everything once.

Rehearsals have been going well. I'm a little worried about memorizing all my lines, but I've been working hard at it. I play three characters: Troll Warrior Gorgondolous, the Goddess Xephus and a knight, Lady Antonia. Gorgondolous doesn't have many lines, but that's all right because Xephus and Lady Antonia do and because I'm just grateful to be part of community theater.

Jenkins wanted the cast to have their lines memorized by March 2 because we were scheduled to perform the play five times at the end of March.

I've met so many interesting people, and lots of them share similar interests as me, such as certain TV shows, such as "The Big Bang Theory," and music, such as "The Beatles."

Fellow Castmates

Two of my castmates - Rachel Habbe and Macci Johnson - have invited me to play "Magic: The Gathering" with them after the topic was brought up. I somewhat dabbled in the game in middle school because my older brother, John, started playing. But I haven't touched the game since, so please don't ask me how to play. I'd love to get back into it and make new friends. Last Christmas, John

gifted me a personalized "Magic: The Gathering" deck centered around Daryl Dixon from "The Walking Dead" because he knows I'm a huge fan of the show.

I mentioned the deck to Habbe and Johnson when we were talking about the game, and they asked if I could bring it to the next rehearsal. And when I did, Habbe, Johnson and a few other castmates were fascinated with it.

Appearing in the FACE play has been such a neat experience because not only had I always wanted to be part of theater, but because it reignited my interest in both "Magic: The Gathering" and my passion for "Lord of the Rings." Plus, meeting people with such unique - while still being somewhat similar - personalities has really kept me wanting to be at every rehearsal.

Now, I do need to confess something. But before I do, let me provide some context. In high school when I first read "The Hobbit,"

"Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring" and "Lord of the Rings: Two Towers," I never read "Lord of the Rings: Return of the King." After I read each of the books, my godmother would show me each of the corresponding movies. But

"We're always looking for different ideas and opportunities, and what you have in mind might be something incredible ..."

— Sara Ruding, FACE vice president

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Director Leslie Jenkins (left) gives Erica Hollinshead-Stead (center) pointers on one of her scenes, while Macci Johnson (right) reviews her lines.

because I never read “Lord of the Rings: Return of the King,” we never watched the movie together. Until recently, it felt weird trying to watch the movie having never read the book.

But being in “Quest” has inspired me to rewatch the movies – all of the movies.

Some of my castmates have performed with FACE before, but some haven’t.

Erica Hollinshead-Stead, 41, and her daughter, Eveyn Stead, 8, chose to join “Quest” because Erica had been in FACE productions in middle school and high school. They recently moved back to the Effingham area from Dallas, after living there for 20 years.

They were involved in a recent production put on by Three Chicks and a Stage – another community theater group, but “Quest” is Eveyn’s first FACE production.

“A lot of people move through the crews, and honestly, I was not ready to do another play yet. But Les [Leslie Jenkins] messaged me and was like, ‘Hey, do you want to do this play?’ Then I saw what the concept of it was, and I saw the script,” said Erica. “Then I wanted to do it.”

“And I just jumped right in, and now everyone that’s young wants to join because of me,” added Eveyn.

“We couldn’t resist, long story short,” added Erica. “There’s a lot of fantasy going on in our house, between ‘Lord of the Rings,’ ‘Narnia’ and ‘Pirates of the Caribbean.’”

Although Dallas provided Erica and Eveyn more opportunities, experiences weren’t as meaningful to them as they are in Effingham.

“It’s hard to have a deep experience. Her day care did a dance recital, but it was very much like, we showed up at the place where they were going to have the thing. They took the kids up on stage. They did the thing, handed them back to us,”

said Erica. “There was no practicing in the theater or setting up or doing any of the backstage things.

“What’s kind of interesting is, coming back here, things might not be as flashy, and they might not be as built up, but there’s a lot of opportunity for you to get in and have a really deep experience,” she continued. “And anything that you want that doesn’t exist, there’s room for you to help try to make it exist ... if you are willing to dig in and create something new.”

Kent Wolf, 57, and his son, Tristan, 17, are in a similar position. Like Eveyn, Tristan has also been in a Three Chicks and a Stage production. This was also his first FACE production. Kent has been involved with theater off and on for 18 years.

Kent has been involved with a handful of theater groups. The first production he was part of was “Rocky Horror Picture Show” through Charleston Alley Theatre – a now-closed theater in Charleston. He has seen the movie hundreds of times, so he already knew all of his lines – except for a few minor changes.

“People were getting mad because the first night of rehearsal, I was doing everybody’s part,” said Kent. “They’re like, ‘Hey, this is my part.’ I’m like, ‘OK, OK. I’ll give it up.’”

Eighteen years ago while working at the Rosebud Theatre – now the Effingham Performance Center – one of his co-workers was directing “Death by Chocolate” through FACE, which inspired Kent to audition for the group’s next production: “Laughing Room Only.”

“Finding that route with all of the theater people was just a blessing,” said Kent. “That continued over into FACE. I kept going back and forth between (Charleston Alley Theatre) for quite a while.”

Kent is a stay-at-home father with three children. His wife, Amanda, was eager for him to get out of the house. She had

him take Tristan to auditions.

His favorite aspect of being involved in FACE is “being able to come out and get together with a bunch of other people and put on something that somebody might find amazing,” Kent said. “Somebody might find it terrible, but somebody might really enjoy it and be inspired by it.”

The FACE vice president and assistant director of “Quest,” Sara Ruding, has worked with Kent in a few productions before “Quest,” during her nine years with the organization. This is her fourth time being an assistant director. Along with FACE, Ruding is also involved with The Heart Theatre’s restoration and CORE (Career Opportunities for Regional Employment) Academy.

This summer, she will be directing her first production, “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged),” something she’s been wanting to direct for a long time.

“I wanted to get more of a feel of how handling directing a show was because I want to make sure I do it right,” said Ruding. “I want to make sure that I’m comfortable with it because when your leader’s comfortable, everybody else around you is going to feel comfortable, too.”

Part of the profits from “Quest” go to Effingham Unit 40 Schools’ Mentoring Program. Ruding hopes to continue partnering with local nonprofits to share FACE’s production’s profits with. Those involved with the nonprofit might even be inspired to get involved with FACE, says Ruding.

“I like thinking outside the box and different ways to help the arts grow,” said Ruding. “I’m passionate about the performing arts and history and stuff, so for me, it feels good that I’m able to use my talent and also my time to keep that kind of stuff going and thriving.”

Ruding encourages anyone who might be even somewhat interested in FACE – the choir, the orchestra or the theater group – to reach out and come to future audition dates. If someone doesn’t want to actually audition, she still encourages them to come and sit in on auditions to get a feel for it. FACE also welcomes people who might be more intrigued by creating costumes, helping with set designs or other backstage help.

“We’re always looking for different ideas and opportunities, and what you have in mind might be something incredible and could change things and give us different windows of opportunity to do even more fine arts in the community,” said Ruding.

“Don’t be afraid to ask questions. I welcome any questions, even stupid questions,” Ruding continued. “I’ll take them because I don’t think there’s such a thing, except: ‘how does ink come out of pens?’ That might be a dumb question, but I still don’t understand it.”

To get involved, people can contact FACE through its Facebook page, its email – faceatthemall@gmail.com – or by calling Ruding directly at 618-704-8510.

Wilson Walk (center) and Rob Grupe (right) rehearse a “Quest” scene for Director Leslie Jenkins.



DEPUTY DALE REPORTS FOR DUTY

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Effingham County Sheriff's therapy dog brightens people's days

School Resource Officer Chris Greuel and Deputy Dale pose outside the Effingham County Government Center.

Story and Photos
Marie Adamick
Effingham Magazine

Deputy Dale joined the Effingham County Sheriff's Office in December 2023 as its first therapy dog.

He is a 4-year-old advanced K-9 Good Citizen poodle mix from Brevard County, Florida. Now-retired School Resource Officer Alex Ritz learned of a program there that takes dogs that are willing to work from their animal shelter, and county inmates help train them. Each dog has to pass certain tests and meet certain standards for approachability, demeanor and obedience. After the dog is fully trained, a handler from a police department will travel to train with the dog for a week. The training and adoption fee are completely free.

When Ritz approached Sheriff Paul Kuhns with the idea of getting a therapy dog, Kuhns was hesitant for a few reasons, including cost and the purpose of having one.

Around that same time, there was an active sexual assault case involving children, and the children had to testify. A few people brought up the idea of bringing a therapy dog into the courthouse's waiting room because children are more willing to talk to a dog in situations like that. But Kuhns still hesitated.

Then-Detective Tom Webb, who now serves as deputy chief, advised Kuhns to reconsider therapy dogs because they can be very helpful, he said. Kuhns then allowed Donna Rouleau to bring her therapy dog into the courthouse to help aid in the case.

"What a difference they say it made. Those parents still talk about that," said Kuhns.

"They were so thankful to have him there, and that's when I first saw that maybe there is something to this."

Soon after that, Deputy Dale joined the sheriff's office.

"It's a barrier breaker because when people see Dale, they're not scared so much anymore," said Kuhns. "Maybe they don't talk to the police officers so much, but they want to talk to Dale, and they want to pet him and they want to look at him and rub his ears."

Everybody at the sheriff's office loves to see Deputy Dale, said Kuhns. The dog remembers who gives him treats, so those are his favorite people. Sometimes when Deputy Dale is in the office at the same time as Sheriff Kuhns, he will stare through Kuhns' office door window until either he or someone else in the office gives him treats or attention. The



Effingham County Sheriff Paul Kuhns jokes that when he had to run for sheriff, he was thankful that Deputy Dale couldn't run because he would probably beat him.



School Resource Officer Chris Greuel and Deputy Dale visit Dieterich Unit 30 Schools Director of Nutrition Misty Lindeman.



Teutopolis Unit 50 second and third grade students pet Deputy Dale during School Resource Officer Chris Greuel's visit during recess.



Teutopolis Unit 50 second and third grade students pet Deputy Dale during School Resource Officer Chris Greuel's visit during recess.



Dieterich Unit 30 kindergarten and first grade students pet Deputy Dale during School Resource Officer Chris Greuel's visit during recess.

only time Deputy Dale wants to be around Kuhns is when he has treats. And he knows exactly where in his office they are.

"I think that it softens or changes the image that we put forth as an organization. I think Dale helps us soften that a little bit," said Kuhns. "We do more than the police work that you would think ... and I think Dale helps promote that image."

Some people may argue that the sheriff's office is wasting time and money on a therapy dog, but he doesn't use any tax dollars. The benefits he provides are well worth it, says Kuhns.

"I made the joke before that, thank goodness, when I had to run for sheriff that he couldn't run," said Kuhns. "Because I bet he would've beat me. I worry about that. That's how popular Dale is."

When Officer Ritz left the sheriff's office, School Resource Officer Chris Greuel became Deputy Dale's handler in June 2025 – about two months before the 2025-2026 school year began. He was excited to be a school resource officer, and Dale was just an added bonus. Officer Greuel's kids and wife had always wanted an indoor pet, so he was glad to be Deputy Dale's new handler.

The duo visits both Teutopolis Unit 50 schools and Dieterich Unit 30 schools daily to brighten people's day. Whenever possible, they also aid in emergency events, such as car accidents, to help calm people.

In 2025, Greuel and Deputy Dale were on duty when a roll-over car accident happened in Dieterich involving a mother and a young child.

"It was actually more interesting to see the mother react with him. She was in a little bit more of a crisis mode than the kid was," said Greuel. "She just sat there and petted Dale for five or 10 minutes, and cooled off a little bit. So it was really cool to see him work in a high-stress environment, as opposed to a school full of kid chaos. So he has a way with people. He's very good at it."

As a school resource officer, Greuel is the sheriff's liaison with the schools, helping with crime prevention and teaching safety classes.

"They're looking out for the welfare and the benefit of everyone there, but especially the kids," said Kuhns. "They also serve as a deterrent, and they're well trained to deal with any violence that would happen at the schools."

When the weather permits them, Officer Greuel and Deputy Dale stand outside of the schools during drop-off to help make the transition a little smoother for younger kids, whether they're having a rough morning or they don't want to leave their parents.

"I get a lot of good reactions early in the morning," said Greuel.

Throughout the school day, the pair roam the halls to look

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for schoolchildren who might need a little cheering up. It's Deputy Dale's official duty to brighten people's days, and he sometimes gets the occasional treat for it.

"The way he's trained, he doesn't negatively react to anybody. He's pretty good at handling all sorts of inputs from people, all sorts of stress levels and how they approach him. He handles them all very well," said Greuel. "He gets clobbered pretty much as soon as he gets to the school, so we try to keep kids from crowding him too much. But he does so well with it. I'm impressed by how well he does with it, to be honest."

They also visit the kids during recess and between classes in the halls.

Having Deputy Dale really helps Greuel with his job as a school resource officer because it's easier to gain kids' trust and do an effective job with a dog. Deputy Dale really helps bridge the gap between kids and officers.

When Deputy Dale gets tired throughout the work day, he'll get moody with Greuel, who says it's similar to dragging a brick around.

"God bless, Alex. It was all his idea, and he put all the work into it. I don't think the county realizes how blessed they were for him doing all that," said Greuel. "That [Florida] county and their sheriff's department for putting that together, that's really impressive to me."

During school visits to Teutopolis Unit 50 and Dieterich Unit 30, Greuel and Deputy Dale try to see everyone, but that's not always possible.

"The kids love him," said Teutopolis Grade School Secretary Amber Probst. "When they come in here and he's in the office, then absolutely, we're excited to see him!"

Seeing Deputy Dale is the highlight of Probst's day, and she always gives him treats when she sees him.

"And if I'm not here, I make sure whoever is here gives him his treats," said Probst.

Teutopolis Grade School Principal Sherry Hoehn reflected on when the duo welcomes students during drop off: It helps with the transition, especially the younger students.

"He's a good addition to the team. Especially at the beginning of the year when we've got our littles that are a little nervous about coming to school and leaving mom and dad, Chris and Deputy Dale stand out front and greet the students as they come in," said Hoehn. "I feel like kids that maybe are a little shy sometimes, they'll make conversation either with Chris or Dale just because Dale is there."

Dieterich Grade School Counselor Lauren Fowler says she loves having Deputy Dale around because he's been really helpful when upset students come into her office, especially with younger students.

"Just having him walk them to class has been helpful," said Fowler. "Kids who I know have trauma or other problems, I can see them relax around him and feel more at home while at school."

There haven't been any problems between Deputy Dale and

students because the kids love him, says Fowler.

"I see them [the kids] smile more. I see them interact with Deputy Greuel, and I think that would be hard, otherwise, to do," said Fowler. "The kids who have trauma or I know they're having a bad day, and they see him in the hall, they get down and they pet him and they smile and it makes them happy for a little bit."

"I like the fact that he's a therapy dog," Fowler added. "It kind of takes away from the stigma with mental health. I feel like it puts the face of mental health out there a little bit, too."

Deputy Dale knows his way to the cafeteria in both schools because that's another spot where he gets daily treats.

"He brightens our day," said Dieterich Unit 30 Director of Nutrition Misty Lindeman. "The kids

love Dale. They love to pet him, play with him ... It makes a difference for the kids."

After Deputy Dale and Greuel are home for the day, Greuel takes off the bandanna Dale wears, and when he does, Dale acts completely different. He gets the zoomies and plays with Greuel's kids because he knows he's done for the day.

"It's been good for our office. I think it's good for the public. It's good for the kids. It's been positive," said Kuhns. "It's all been positive when it comes to Dale and what he does."

... when people see Dale,
they're not scared so much
anymore ... they want to
talk to Dale."

— Effingham County Sheriff
Paul Kuhns



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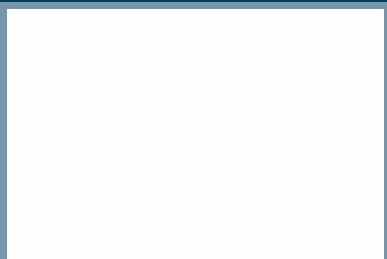
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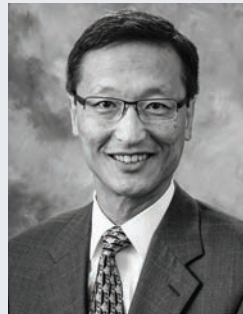
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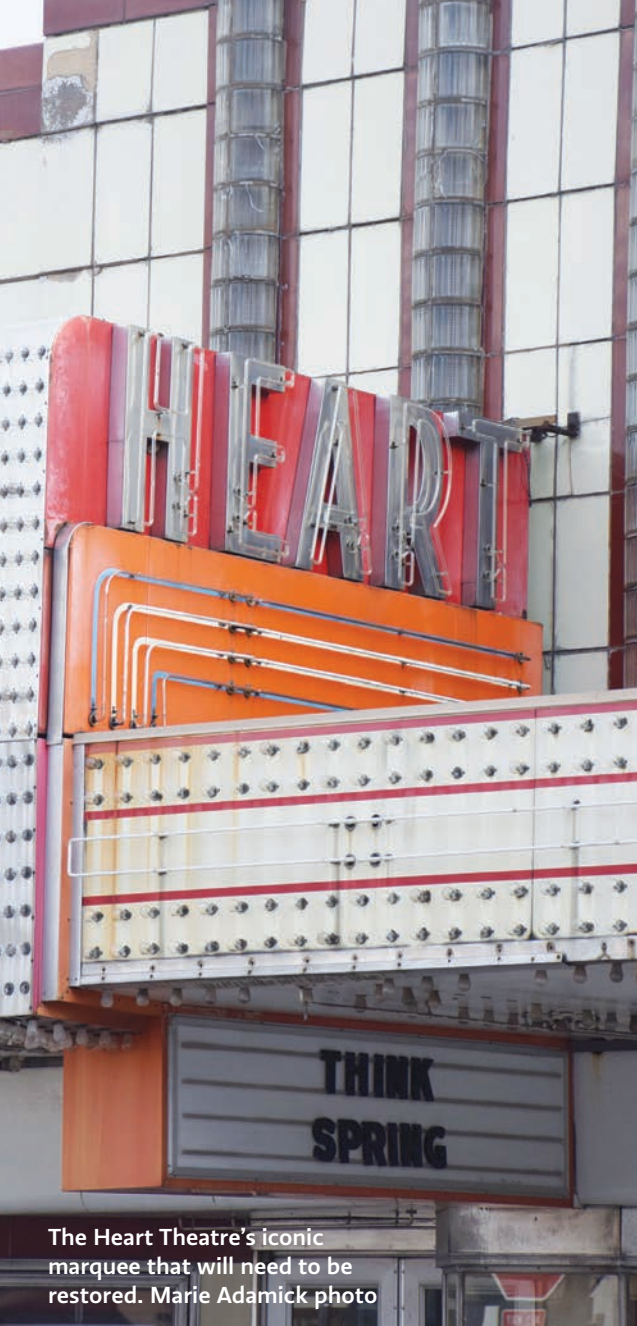
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The Heart Theatre's iconic marquee that will need to be restored. Marie Adamick photo

THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN EFFINGHAM

Breathing new life into a beloved theater

Marie Adamick
Effingham Magazine

The Heart Theatre Inc. is a nonprofit group that formed in late 2024, consisting of board members who plan to restore The Heart Theatre into a community gathering space, a multi-use performance venue and a place for all people and all abilities to enjoy.

Restoration plans include preserving the original 1940s art deco facade and architecture details; installing new seating, lighting, sound systems and projection systems; and installing new HVAC, electric and fire systems.

The Heart Theatre Inc. Board President Amy Van Bergen purchased the theater in 2022 from Tad Sligar, and then performed various marketing and feasibility studies in 2023. She also applied to have the theater added to the National Register of Historic Places. In late 2024, she created the nonprofit group in order to donate the property back to the community.

Although Van Bergen was born and raised in Effingham, she later moved to Florida - where she currently resides. She comes back to town every once and a while to visit friends and reminisce.

During one of her trips in 2019 to visit a friend in Effingham, she asked her about what was happening with the theater.

"I just kept looking at the empty, sort of boarded up Heart Theatre, and everything else was vibrant. People were out and about and doing things downtown, and I just kept thinking, 'Why is that empty? What's going on there?' And she said, 'I don't really know,'" said Van Bergen. "That just stuck with me."

Van Bergen works in the nonprofit sector, specifically those that support people with developmental disabilities. Formerly a journalist, Van Bergen switched to running nonprofits after her third child was born with Down syndrome.

"This could not only be a place where people with disabilities could attend performances, but they could also work there," said Van Bergen. "They could volunteer there, or they could even be a performer there."

She has no background in restoration, theater or performing arts, but she wanted to be involved if anything were to happen with the theater. She

The Heart Theatre Inc. board members preparing for their Feb. 13 event: "Fall in Love With The Heart." Front row, from left: Marlyn Koester, Monique Hortenstine, Carrie Rodman and Amy Van Bergen. Back row, from left: Chase Cooley, Kenny Thies, Brett Ward and Laura Polarek Didier. Not pictured: Nicole Wear-Maloney, Larry Johnson and Sara Ruding. Credit: "The Heart of Effingham" on Facebook.



is able to and does regularly dedicate time to the restoration project since she is semi-retired and her five children are now all grown.

In 2022, Van Bergen talked with Sligar about what it would look like if she were to purchase the theater.

“It really was just this moment of, ‘Let’s just talk about this. What would this look like? And 10 minutes later, I owned it,” said Van Bergen. “I want to do this so that I can donate it to Effingham. Whatever that looks like.”

“I had no intention of moving to Effingham and running a theater. It’s not because I need my name on that marquee,” said Van Bergen. “It’s because this belongs to Effingham, and it has such a history. It was more than just a building to me. It was a place where memories were made.”

She had heard multiple stories from community members about how they got engaged there, first dates, midnight movies, free Saturday night movies and more.

“Everybody has a story if they’re old enough to have attended that,” said Van Bergen.

When applying for it to be nominated on the National Register of Historic Places in 2023, she compared the application process to writing a term paper for school. Lots of research was involved, including citing sources and the reason for the nomination. Van Bergen submitted the nomination for the theater’s historic art deco features throughout the building.

Since Van Bergen doesn’t have any experience in theaters or live in the area anymore, she didn’t want to be in charge of the project. She believes the theater is an iconic and historic staple of downtown Effingham, so she wants the community to feel like they have a sense of ownership.

“This is a community project,” said Van Bergen. “It just needed somebody to say, ‘Let’s do it.’ So I guess I’m the ‘let’s do it,’ person, and I can’t wait until the whole community owns it.”

This inspired her to start the nonprofit group - The Heart Theatre Inc. - so she could donate the theater to it. In January 2024, the group submitted the paperwork to the IRS, and nine months later, they learned it was approved. They had also learned that it had been approved three weeks after the paperwork was submitted; they just never received the official letter.



Inside The Heart Theatre, which needs lots of restoration work. Marie Adamick photo



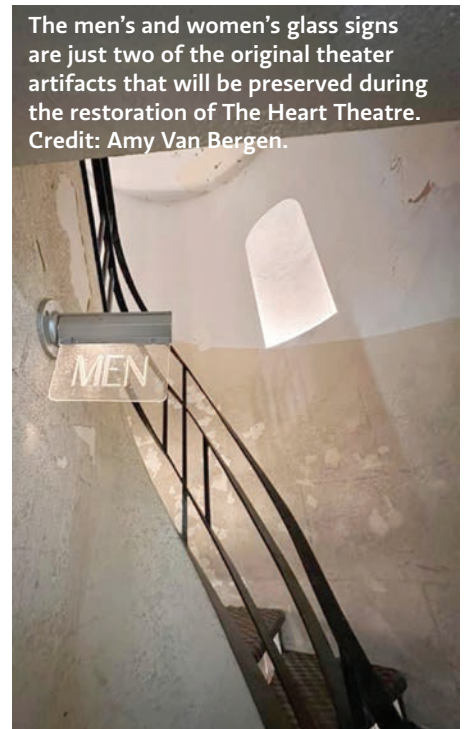
From left: The Heart Theatre Inc. Board Members Carrie Rodman, Sara Ruding and Laura Polarek Didier discussing the different theater artifacts during the Feb. 13 event: “Fall in Love With The Heart” event at Tuscan Hills Winery. Credit: “The Heart of Effingham” on Facebook.

The background information phase

In the beginning of 2025, Van Bergen advertised for more people to be on the nonprofit’s board, since there were only a few at the time.

“It was overwhelming and really heart-warming. People’s stories, memories, why they wanted to do it,” said Van Bergen. “We weren’t looking for the ‘who’s who’ of Effingham. We were looking for people who were willing to roll up their sleeves and do a lot of this unglamorous, time-consuming work to get ready to do this ... This is not a sprint. This is a marathon.”

Board members include Chase Cooley, Laura Polarek Didier, Monique Hortenstine, Carrie Rodman, Marlyn Koester, Kenny Thies and Sara Ruding. Nicole



The men’s and women’s glass signs are just two of the original theater artifacts that will be preserved during the restoration of The Heart Theatre. Credit: Amy Van Bergen.

Wear-Maloney is the secretary, Brett Ward is the vice president, Larry Johnson is the treasurer and Van Bergen is the president.

The first official meeting of the board was held in June 2025 at Tuscan Hills Winery, mainly because Rodman is the manager there. They generated ideas and fine-tuned some ideas that had been on the drawing board. Later that year, The Heart Theatre Inc. participated in the City of Effingham’s Halloween Parade and Hometown Christmas Lighted Parade.

Marketing, government and technical advisory committees were born as well, since the theater is planned to be a multi-purpose venue for movies, live



The Heart Theatre, Inc. Board Member Kenny Thies explains that film reels that were going to play next were placed on this table inside the projectionist's room.



Thies advises against turning on the remaining projector from the 1950s because it's been multiple years since it was last used.

theater, live music, community events and private rentals. One of the board members is a fundraising professional, who will host a training for the board in May. She'll walk future volunteers through The Heart Theatre Inc.'s goals, budgets and paths to get there.

"We need people who understand sound and lighting systems and acoustics, so we get it right for the performers," said Van Bergen.

Right now, the nonprofit group is in its beginning phases of creating bylaws for the group and reviewing different architectural renderings to learn about what options they have for The Heart Theatre. After that, they'll create a budget and plan fundraising opportunities.

"When we did that small fundraiser at the winery (in February 2026), there were so many people coming up to us and grabbing our hands and saying, 'Thank you for doing this. This is so exciting. We can't wait.' There's no downside to this," said Van Bergen. "I think the old-fashioned theaters sort of represent escape, but also a way to connect with other people. And I think we really need that, all of us."

The unique skills of board members

The restoration project piqued Board Member Kenny Thies' interest in early 2025 when Van Bergen was on the hunt for more board members. He called Van Bergen to express his interest in the project.

When Thies was 5 years old, he saw his first movie there: "Charlotte's Web." Mike Stephens – one of the previous owners – would show free movies in the summer for children, Thies recalled.

"I had a memory of going to the movies my whole childhood, and then I started working at the movie theater at the mall in 1998," said Thies. Stephens "was the head manager out there for seven years."

Thies used to work at the mall's theater before it switched to digital projectors. Once they made the switch, he stepped back to earn a certification as a digital projection technician.

A single projector that dates back to the 1950s remains in the theater today. While it isn't the first projector the theater used, it was the last to be used there, and Thies was the last one to use it.

About eight years ago, Thies received a call from Sligar in-

quiring about running the projector. Sligar once worked for Thies at the mall movie theater. Thies was able to get it running, but he advises against trying to start it now because of moisture.

"When you had a projectionist, the projectionist used to be the most important person at a theater because if you didn't have a projectionist, you didn't have a movie," said Thies. "It's a pretty amazing piece of history here."

Other board members had found some mementos left behind from people who visited the theater in its glory days, including a wallet, earrings and a ring with an inscription on it. While board members are still working to find the ring's and earrings' owners, they were able to find the family to give the wallet back to because it contained a picture of a teenage girl with a note on it. The family offered to let The Heart Theatre Inc. keep it as a memento.

"It was just really neat to be able to contact the family and say, 'Is this your relative?' And they confirmed it was," said Thies. "I'm excited about restoring it back to its former glory. It needs a lot of work. There's a lot of fond memories of The Heart Theatre throughout Effingham and the surrounding community, and I just think keeping the history alive of the theater for downtown Effingham is just a phenomenal project to be involved with."

Board Member Laura Polarek Didier is a retired outreach librarian whose first job was at The Heart Theatre in high school during the 1970s. As a lover of libraries, history and genealogy, she volunteered to research and build an archive of the theater's history – which dates back to the 1930s.

"I have fond memories of it because you were the center of town at that time," said Didier. "Back then in the '70s, going to the movies was, like, your life as a teenager. You did that a couple times a month or maybe even more than that ... There'd be lines down the street trying to get in."

Last year, The Heart Theatre Inc. participated in both the Halloween Parade and Downtown Lighted Christmas Parade. In each of the parades, the theater's float was a recreation of a theater with seats, a projector and a movie playing. In the Halloween Parade, people were dressed as characters from "Beauty and the Beast," and in the Lighted Christmas Parade, the movie that played was "It's a Wonderful Life."

In February, The Heart Theatre Inc. organized an event at Tuscan Hills Winery to inform the community on what

has been happening with the theater. Board members were scheduled on March 19 to partner with the Effingham County Museum to present "History of The Heart Theatre with Effingham County Museum." It would explore how The Heart Theatre became an iconic piece of downtown Effingham, displaying different artifacts from its history. The museum agreed to display some of the theater's artifacts, but not all of them due to technical restrictions.

"We're really in the creative stage right now, trying to figure out exactly how we're gonna structure it before we go out to try and raise funds for it," said Didier. "We have our work cut out for us, but we're all really excited."

Didier, Thies and Van Bergen all noted that the marquee will need to be restored, once they get to that step in the restoration process. In order to do that, it will have to be shipped off somewhere; it can't be done on-site. All three mentioned how they are a little concerned that the community will think The Heart Theatre is being demolished.

"We have joked about how everyone is going to lose their minds the day that marquee comes off of there. They are going to be convinced that we're tearing the whole thing down," said Van Bergen. "We will probably put marquee messages up for months leading up to that, with maybe even a countdown to that."

Board Member Sara Ruding also has memories of attending movies at The Heart Theatre when she was a kid. In the late 1990s, she got her first job there. Like Didier, she's also passionate about history, specifically Effingham's.

"I'm passionate about the performing arts and history," said Ruding. "So for me, it feels good that I'm able to use my talent and also my time to keep that kind of stuff going and thriving."

While also being involved with FACE (Fine Arts, County of Effingham) and CORE Academy, Ruding is constantly taking notes and thinking outside the box of ways she can help improve the projects she participates in.

"It's become this kind of passion project of Effingham," said Ruding. "It's definitely something that I'm very excited to be a part of and definitely want to use all my time and talent to help make it into, hopefully, a great and exciting new entertainment space and area to help more opportunities for fun, creative and - let's be honest - nerd events to happen."

The future of the Heart

The Heart Theatre Inc. is in touch with an architect, and they are reviewing different architectural renderings and options for the theater. The board has also been in contact with a family member of the original architect because there are no original architectural drawings that have survived, says Didier.

Some of the board members - like Didier and Ruding - have theater experience, so they will be able to speak


on the technical details regarding the theater's design.

The nonprofit group hopes to have concrete plans and budgets by early summer for the first five years of operation. Once plans solidify more, the board will launch a fundraising campaign.

"It's gonna happen. I don't know the timeline. I don't know how much money, but it's gonna happen, and it's gonna be amazing," said Van Bergen. "And I can't wait to be there on opening night, whenever that is."

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'TEARS CAME TO MY EYES'

Krista Phillips is your Miss Illinois County Fair Queen

Cathy Griffith

Effingham Magazine

Krista Phillips' life has been a whirlwind since she became the 68th Miss Illinois County Fair Queen in January. "It's been crazy, but it's been awesome, too. I'm excited for the summer," she said.

That's when she will visit 30 county fairs across the state, not to mention preside at the Illinois State Fair.

It's a dream she has been chasing since she was young – the culmination of years of pageant competition. She watched both her sisters vie for it; each only reached second runner-up. And after seeing the experiences of past state queens, including one from neighboring Clay County, Phillips knew she really wanted it.

Phillips thought it might stay a dream even though she was confident in her performance on the last day of the pageant. In the moments leading up to announcing the winner, she recalled feeling a lot of nerves, especially as the name of each runner-up was read.

Finally, came her name.

"I was genuinely so shocked and surprised, and you could probably see that from all the pictures," she said of being announced the winner. "And then instantly tears came to my eyes, and it was just such a surreal moment."

Looking back on it, Phillips said everybody was screaming.

"All of my family rushed to the front, and they're all just like jumping up and down, screaming, crying, like they were so excited," she said.



Krista Phillips is crowned 2026 Miss Illinois County Fair Queen. Studio 131 Photography

Phillips felt the support from her family, fellow contestants, Effingham community members, and even strangers at the pageant.

"It was just very overwhelming," she said.

The moment was also emotional for her sisters.

"They're excited to go through the journey with me and kind of be alongside me while I'm wearing the crown," she said. "They definitely want to try to be involved as much as they can."

Path to Pageantry

Phillips may have followed in her older sisters' footsteps. But they might not have taken the path if it weren't for her.

Phillips said she was the shyest among her sisters as a child. When she was little, her mom entered her in the Effingham County Fair's Little Miss pageant. She remembers it was easy, since everyone won. Then,

in junior high, she wanted to compete in the Junior Miss pageant but was too shy to do so by herself. She convinced her oldest sister, Shayna, to compete in the Miss pageant the same year.

“And that’s kind of what started my family and the pageants. Because my oldest sister loved doing the Miss, she continued running until she won. And then my second sister (Kaylee), she was like, oh, my sister is queen, let me run,” she said.

Kaylee also won. After seeing her sisters win, Phillips felt a strong desire to become queen. So, when she was old enough, she ran for Miss in 2023 and placed first runner-up.

“After not getting it, it does hurt, and it does set you back,” she said.

But Phillips knew if she truly wanted something, perseverance and determination were key.

The next year, she competed again and placed first runner-up once more. She admitted she was very disappointed.

“But I knew in my heart that I still wanted it. So, I went back again,” she said.

This time, Phillips said she was a completely different



Krista Phillips participates in the Effingham County Little Miss pageant. Submitted photo



Krista Phillips is pictured with her family at the Effingham County Junior Miss pageant in 2017. Submitted photo



Krista Phillips, center, poses with, from left, grandmother Susan Hicks, sister Kaylee Phillips, parents Glen and Jeni Phillips, friend Kaden Young, sister Shayna Scott and brother-in-law Brady Scott. Studio 131 Photography



Krista Phillips reacts to being named Miss Illinois County Fair Queen earlier this year. Studio 131 Photography

person from the first year she ran for the title.

“There’s just so much growth that the pageant has helped me with, but also just a lot of life experiences that came,” she said.

She attributes her experiences to improving her communication skills and confidence. That, in turn, helped her win the Miss Effingham County Fair Queen title in 2025.

“God has a plan for you. I’m very faithful. And so just remembering that having the crown or not does not determine my worth,” she said.

“But if it’s something that I want, then I’ll continue to push myself and go out and get it.”

Influences

Phillips says faith plays a “very big role” in her life. She participates in Bible study and serves as a resident adviser at St. John’s Catholic Newman Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she is a student.

“I’m just finding this group of students that are really passionate about their faith, and it helped me to grow in mine as well,” she said.

Phillips discovered the past state fair queen is also Catholic. She didn’t realize the impact it had until she posted about a Catholic conference called SEEK just a few weeks before the state pageant. The number of girls at the pageant who asked her about it, she said, inspired her.

“Just seeing that all these girls are doing pageants, but they also have this deep faith rooted in them as well,” she said.

Phillips believes that following her faith and trusting in God has helped keep her and her sisters grounded.

“How can we use this platform to honor God and to help influence others to be better people as well?” she said.

Besides faith, Phillips said sports have also influenced her life.

Phillips spent her first two years of college attending Lincoln Trail College in Robinson, where she played volleyball. She says being part of a team helped her become a good communicator and learn to really lean on others.

“That was just a really cool experience that I was able to have before coming to the U of I and getting this bigger school experience,” she said.

The competition

The Miss Illinois County Fair Queen pageant features four events: an interview, an evening gown contest, a swimsuit contest, and an onstage speech. The 75 contestants are then narrowed down to 16, and the process, except for the interview, starts over.

Phillips chose to speak about something she knew well: driving a stick shift. It’s how she learned to drive at 16. In the competition’s final rounds, Phillips needed to talk about a topic she hadn’t experienced firsthand. Phillips was asked about the importance of corn in Illinois. Not having grown up on a farm, Phillips said she had to learn a lot more about agriculture to prepare for the pageant. The research helped her prepare while deepening her appreciation for agriculture.

“It really opened my eyes to just how there’s so much in the world that I don’t know about agriculture,” she said, noting the true purpose of the county fairs and pageants is to promote agriculture.

She learned a lot about ag as Effingham County Fair Queen, talking to 4-H members. She said she will get to do more of that as state fair queen since the Illinois Department of Agriculture employs her.

“So, I’m really excited to see how that will help to educate

“I just love the community of Effingham. I think everybody is so supportive.”

— Krista Phillips

me while I'm also educating other people just because my background isn't extremely farm-heavy," she said.

Another thing Phillips did to prepare was lots of walking in heels.

"I think my mom would always tell me to wear my heels, whether I came home from a day of school and she'd tell me to put my heels on while I walk around the kitchen and do chores, just to get my feet used to it," she said.

Phillips admits she was a bit reluctant.

"At the moment, I was like, 'Mom, I do not want to walk around in heels all the time.'"

But Phillips admits her mom knew best. After all, pageant contestants wear heels all day for days.

"So it is very tiring, but just being able to practice and prepare for it, that way I can still be confident and do my best," she said.

It paid off, as judges noted her walk and confidence during the evening gown portion was stunning.

"They said I did good in all the other categories as well, but as soon as I came out in that, they were just like, yes, she's got it," she said.

Phillips developed close friendships with some of the other contestants at state. She is looking forward to seeing them again this summer as she helps crown the next county fair queens across the state.

"We talked about our fairs and just different things that we loved. And so being able to go and actually see that firsthand is something that I'm really excited for," she said.

Phillips finds the camaraderie to be the best part about competing in the pageant.

"You definitely create some good bonds and some good friendships," she said.

Life after queen

Phillips will hit the county fair circuit after she graduates from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in May with a bachelor's degree in business management and marketing. She knows her duties that lie ahead will be tiring. Still, she's excited.

"My mindset is just do as much as I can, because this is the only time that I can do all this," she said.

After summer, she will start full-time at J & J Gaming in Effingham. Right now, she works part-time there as a loyalty marketing specialist.

Phillips believes the pageants helped her earn her degree and kickstart her career. They provided her with experience in presenting in class and interviewing for jobs.

"Just having the ability to talk and be confident in myself and who I am, I think that's helped me a lot," she said.

Phillips has always planned to return to the community she grew up in.

"I just love the community of Effingham. I think everybody is so supportive," she said.

She hopes to own a small business in the future, something she's familiar with from her family's ice cream trailer, Top-pins Soft Serve and More.

"Seeing the small business side and having all that customer service and just getting that great feedback from people in the community, that's really inspired me to want to move on and own my own small business someday," she said.

Her desire to be a small-business owner also stems from her time in the Effingham County CEO program. During the program, Phillips visited different businesses. She saw how Effingham residents support each other through fundraising, sponsorships, and by collaborating to help one another succeed.

"I think that's something that our town does really well, and we're constantly growing and evolving," she said.

Phillips has not seen that in many other counties.

"That really just drove me back to Effingham, along with my family," she said.

As Phillips begins a new chapter of her life, she advises future contestants to keep chasing their dreams, even if they don't succeed at first.

"Sometimes, it just might not be your time, but don't let that get your head down because we're all queens, whether we have a crown on our head or not," she said.



Krista Phillips poses with her entire "fan section" of family, friends and Effingham County Fair board members. Studio 131 Photography.



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The Effingham Daily News captures in words and pictures the life of our community in print three days per week and every day online at effinghamdailynews.com. Here are some snapshots of those stories from the past couple months.



▲▲ Shown are City Commissioner Libby Moeller and the City of Effingham's Christmas Card winner, St. Anthony Grade School third grader Samantha Meers. Photo by Marie Adamick



▲▲ National Trail Farm Toy Club Show Vice President Gale Warner (left), grandson Grant (center) and son Grant (right) stand at their family's booth, Dog's Farm Toys, during the semi-annual National Trail Farm Toy Club Show at the Effingham Event Center. Photo by Marie Adamick

DECEMBER



◀◀ HSHS Hospice Spiritual Care Chaplain Krista Stokke gives a warm welcome to those attending the 11th annual Candlelight Memorial Service at HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital. Photo by Marie Adamick

JANUARY



◀◀ Sixty years after the largest draft in Effingham County, 14 of the 37 men who were drafted got together at the Disabled American Veterans Chapter Building to honor their time served during the Vietnam War.

The group was drafted on Jan. 26, 1966, and a few of the men died during service. Others have either passed away or couldn't make the gathering. Back row left to right: Chuck Rentfrow, Terry Koester, Roger Prather, George Lutz, Gene Turner, Robert Bergfeld and Richard Probst. Front row left to right: Wayne Cox, Craig Wise, Charles McWhorter, Albert Seiler, Richard "Zeke" Hampton and Garland Bloemker. Photo by Marie Adamick

Michelle Hartke stocks the new Community Cabinet at the Effingham Public Library. It is located in a corner of the library's Reading Room. Photo by Cathy Griffith ▼▼



JANUARY



▲▲ Tom Wright speaks after being given the Effingham Daily News 2026 Citizen of the Year award during the Effingham County Chamber Gala at the Thelma Keller Convention Center. Photo by Cathy Griffith



◀◀ Customer Service Citation Awards were presented to Effingham Police Officers Brittany Lowery, Jared Purcell and Jesse Brandt (pictured left to right) and Dave Myers, who was absent from the city council meeting. A husband and wife were traveling through Effingham when they noticed an elderly woman having a medical episode while attempting to hitchhike on the interstate. The couple picked her up, and after talking with her, it was clear to them that she needed help. They exited the highway and called the Effingham Police Department. Officers responded, and over 90 minutes, the officers worked diligently to resolve the situation. Photo by Marie Adamick

FEBRUARY

Willard and Jeanette Kopplin look at a photo album that documents their 75 years of marriage. Willard visits her every day at Lutheran Care Center in Altamont. Photo by Cathy Griffith ▶▶



Effingham & Area Events



April 3

Fish Fry at Teutopolis Banquet Hall

April 4

Lake Sara Dam Run: A Run It Forward Fundraiser Event. Main proceeds benefit Effingham County, Neoga, Sigel & Arcola athletes with intellectual disabilities & \$100 will be given to five local families dealing with cancer-related illnesses. Walk-up registration Friday night 4-7 p.m. and race morning one hour before each race. Half marathon at 7 a.m., 8 Mile at 8 a.m., 5K Run & Walk at 9 a.m. and virtual. Location: 9352 East Park Avenue, Effingham, IL. Take Interstate 57 to Exit 160, go north on Rt 32-33 to the Lake Sara Road. Follow signs. Pizza, subs, chips, fruit, bagels, DQ Dilly Bars & Effingham County Porkburgers! Free food and drinks for participants. Free-will donation for family & friends. Post-party at Midwest Marina, just down the road!

Parking Lot Party at Legacy Harley-Davidson. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Music by Twin Cam Entertainment, food, ABATE of Illinois bike raffle trailer, bike show (classes from sport bikes to touring), kids bike show (bring your little ones and their ride). All ages welcome.

Easter Bake Sale at Herrick Food Mart. Fundraiser to help with the Herrick 4th of July Celebration. Sale starts 7:30-10:30 a.m.

Easter Egg Hunt And Roll at Lincoln Log Cabin, Lerna, IL.

Easter Egg Hunt 9-10 a.m. at Strasburg Park. Toddlers through grade 3. Easter Bunny will be available for pictures. In event of rain, hunt will take place in the community center in Strasburg.

April 5

Easter Sunrise Service 6:30 a.m. under the arms of the Cross at the Crossroads. Bring lawn chairs. Light refreshments will be served in the Welcome Center following the service. For more info, contact Christy Hakman at 217-821-5276.

April 10

Glo Bingo with the Coles County Council on Aging at Mattoon Eagles Club. Doors open 6 p.m. Bingo starts 7 p.m. 18+ event.

April 10 & 11

Midwest Market Spring Show April 10 from 4-8 p.m. and April 11 from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. at Effingham Event Center. Home décor, handmade, jewelry, boutiques, baked goods, vintage, food trucks and more. Indoor/outdoor market.

April 17

Ladies Night Out in Downtown Effingham. Stores open until 7 p.m.

Gilligan's Island of Death Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. See website for more info.

April 18

Jon Holland Benefit at On The Rox Pub & Grub, Altamont. Food, raffles, 50/50, silent auction, and a band.

Eastern Illinois Spring Fling Rhythm & Blues 5:30-7 p.m. at Groniger Arena, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL. Curated buffet-style dining experience, entertainment, exclusive silent and live auction and vibrant atmosphere, all in support of Eastern Illinois University student-athletes. For more info, contact 217-581-2106.

April 20-22

Food Truck Festival on Main Street in St. Elmo

April 25

Clay Walker. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. theepc.org

First Bike Night Of The Year! 4-6 p.m. at Legacy Harley-Davidson in Effingham.

Jason Bowen Family Benefit SXS Poker Run. Sign up at 11 a.m. Ride leaves 1 p.m. Shorty's Pub in Edgewood. 50/50 drawing, raffles, food, music, auction. For more info, contact Kathleen Smith at 217-821-8814.

May 1

Get the Led Out: A Celebration of "The Mighty Zep." Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. theepc.org

May 8 & 9

Chet Kingery Memorial Bluegrass Festival



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at the historic Chautauqua Auditorium at Forest Park, Shelbyville, IL. Friday evening music by Kenny & Amanda Smith — Coal Creek Station. Saturday features Appalachian Road Show, Lonesome River Band, Tony Holt and the Wildwood Valley Boys and Illinois Rail. Host band is Mackville on Friday and Saturday. For more info, visit mackvillebluegrass.com

May 9

Benefit for Jon Holland at Altamont Fairgrounds Schuetzenfest Building in Altamont starting at 1 p.m. Bake sale, meat bundle raffle, gun raffle, live auction, silent auction, meal provided. Proceeds from the benefit will go to Jon and his family to help them during his battle with Glioblastoma Brain Cancer. For more info, contact Katie Duncan at 217-821-3341 or Tony Althoff at 217-343-9020. Donations can be made directly to the Jonathon K. Holland Benefit Account at Washington Savings Bank.

Mother's Day Market and CEO Pop Up

Downtown Effingham. Build a Bouquet (ticket holders) with each stop downtown providing a different flower, ending with a full bouquet. CEO students' booths set up outside businesses.

Farmers Market Downtown Vandalia

May 14-17

Toledo Spring Festival with theme "Small Town Big Galaxy" in downtown Toledo, IL featuring Luehrs Ideal Rides on the midway. Parade, YMCA Springfest 5K run.

May 28-30

Neoga Days with theme Sweet Summertime.

May 29

Henry Cho — The Empty Nest Tour. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 8 p.m.

May 30

Greenup Citywide Garage Sales

June 6

SBLHC Races for All Paces at O'Brien Stadium on the campus of Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

June 13

Farmers Market Downtown Vandalia

June 18-21

Moccasin Creek Festival at The Stage at Lake Sara, Effingham, IL.

June 19

Downtown Effingham Movie Night

June 19 & 20

Just For Dads Theme: Kids make Gifts for Dad. Downtown Effingham. Each store hosts small activity and kids walk downtown completing gift pieces.

Vandalia Statehouse Grand Levee Festival

June 20

Farmers Market Downtown Vandalia

June 20 & 21

Civil War Weekend at Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site in Lerna, IL.

June 24

Zip Code Day Celebration in Edgewood, IL

June 27

Edgewood 50th Anniversary Fest. Food, games, queen contest, fireworks.

June 28

Golf Outing held by friends & family of Sarah Bush Lincoln Fayette County Hospital at Indian Springs Golf Course in Fillmore. Proceeds to benefit planned renovations at the hospital. Raffle for a week-long stay in the Orlando area, donated by Mike & Jayne Genta of Effingham. Registration and lunch at 11 a.m. Tee time at 1 p.m. For more information, contact Jay Jolliff at 618-531-5278, Theresa Knebel at 618-322-1069 or call 618-283-5401.

June 29-July 3

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July 10

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Elizabeth Eberspacher Nohren	Dove & Dove	Shelbyville	217.774.2137	Adoption/; Close/Private Held; Family; ADR: Family; Trust/Will/Estate
R. Samuel Postlewait	Hughes Tenney Postlewait Coale LLC	Decatur	217.428.5383	Agriculture; Close/Priv Held; Comm Lit; RE: Comm; Trust/Will/Estate
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Todd L. Lindquist	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Adriel E. Zupances	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Personal Injury: General
Keith W. Casteel	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	Agriculture; Banking; Environmental; RE: Comm; Trust/Will/Estate
Joshua J. Dubbelde	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	Close/Private Held; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Scott E. Garwood	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	Close/Private Held; Mergers/Acquisitions; RE Comm; Trust/Will/Estate
James T. Jackson	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	Commercial Litigation; Personal Injury Defense: General; School
Craig W. Runyon	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	Banking; Creditor Rights; RE: Comm; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Darrell A. Woolums	Samuels Miller Schroeder Jackson & Sly	Decatur	217.429.4325	AG; Banking; Gov't/Muni/Lobby/Admin; RE: Comm; Trust/Will/Estate
Timothy M. Shay	Shay & Associates Law Firm LLC	Decatur	217.425.5900	Personal Injury: General; PI: Professional Malpractice; Workers' Comp
Nicholas T. Williams	Shay & Associates Law Firm LLC	Decatur	217.425.5900	Personal Injury: General

This EMERGING LAWYER has been identified by their peers to be among the TOP LAWYERS in Illinois who are age 40 or younger OR who have been admitted to the practice of law for 10 or fewer years.

Elizabeth M. Reynolds	Kanoski Bresney	Decatur	217.429.3509	Workers' Compensation
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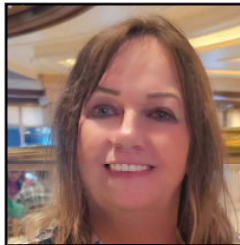
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