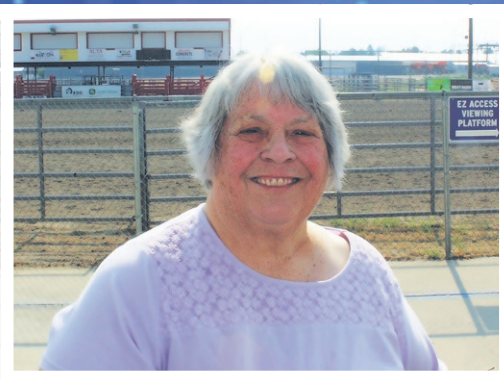




2026 BITTERROOT VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AWARDS





Thank You Bitterroot Valley!

Partners In Home Care is honored to be named **Business of the Year** by the **Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce**.

Thank you for trusting Partners In Home Care, supporting our mission, and voting us Bitterroot's Best. This recognition is especially meaningful because it comes from the communities we serve. Every day, our dedicated team provides compassionate, high-quality care that helps people maintain their comfort, dignity, and independence. We are proud to support individuals and families throughout Western Montana, wherever they call home.

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Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce 2025 Awards

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jodi Mitchell said the awards night will recognize local businesses and leaders, with a night of celebration that is different from previous years.

"This year we are changing up our awards event," she said. "It is no longer a banquet but more of a celebration of the award winners. We'll have a live band, and we have lowered the ticket prices so more people will be able to attend. We are trying to cater to the economy."

The Bitterroot Chamber Awards Night, called "In the Wild West," will be held from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday, August 21, at the Daly Mansion. Ticket prices are \$75 each or there are table options. According to the website, the event will have a no-host bar, live music, silent auction, whiskey, wine & bourbon pull, and "western ruckus!" Learn more about this exciting event at the BVCC website – bitterrootchamber.com.

Chamber of Commerce has been in the valley since 1923. The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1975 when the Chambers of seven towns in the Bitterroot Valley decided to merge. Currently, the BVCC is a robust organization with many networking opportunities, committees and events.

"We are a non-profit organization, dedicated to representing each and every one of its members while amplifying the

collective voice of business in an effort to advocate economic vitality, quality of life and the preservation of the competitive enterprise system," Mitchell said. "In 2020, pre-Covid, we had 416 Chamber members and now we have just over 500."

BVCC staff are Jodi Mitchell, Executive Director, Julie Romano Mock, Office Manager, and Dawn Dueedecke, Membership & Outreach Coordinator.

The 2026 BVCC Board Members are Liz Cook (president), Dyana Canavan (president-Elect), Ryan Williams (treasure), Sandy Bollom (immediate past president), Kim Bishop, Dora Bradt, Sharon Dedmon, Melissa Greenwood, Gary Mitchell, Al Mitchell (board advisor, Tammy Pauley, Mona Quintieri, and Kierstin Schmitt.

A BVCC signature event is Bitterroot Brewfest. This year was the 31st year. It was held in July on the grounds of the Daly Mansion with commemorative glasses, shuttles, tents, over 60 brews, live music, food vendors, and much socialization.

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce motto is, "Our business is your business" and the goal is "communicating, educating, promoting and representing our membership to the general public, to each community in the Bitterroot Valley, to Ravalli County, the state of Montana and the Federal Government of the United States."

List of Chamber Ambassadors

Andrew Kilian, Charlene Miskimen, Christina Fulkerson, Cory Keith, Courtney Hartelius, Darren Bayer, Dixie Dies, Dominic Farrenkopf, Dyana Canavan, Erica Cantrell, Jessica Warnken, Lucas Pernsteiner, Mary Butt, Sirikiet Vieyra, Susan Wetzsteon.



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA, BVCC STAFF

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce staff Executive Director Jodi Mitchell, Office Manager Julie Romano Mock, and Membership & Outreach Coordinator Dawn Dueedecke, are pleased to announce the BVCC 2025 Awards.

Congratulations
to all the Chamber
Award Winners.

**Proud member
of the Bitterroot
Valley Chamber**



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BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR -

Dillon Kouf, Double K Ranch

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Dillon Kouf, Double K Ranch, as Business Person of the Year.

Kouf said the award was an honor and a surprise.

"This was totally unexpected," he said. "It kind of validates that someone out there is paying attention to what we're doing."

Kouf said his dad, Jim, started the ranch in 1985 and built the meat shop on the ranch in 2000. Dillon took over everything in 2019.

Double K raises all their animals then butchers and processes them on site.

"We went through a whole bunch of different avenues like wholesale, and

farmers markets, but my background was in restaurants," Kouf said. "I always knew I wanted to do a restaurant so we started our [Missoula] deli, and it is a meat shop restaurant so you can buy steaks, and you can get a burger."

When a Missoula business owner wanted the Double K Ranch food in his restaurant downtown a new partnership was formed. Three years of planning resulted in a finished restaurant that makes Dillon proud.

"So, now we have the ranch, the meat shop, two restaurants in Missoula and we've cut out all the middleman for our own products," Kouf said. "It is pretty neat operation - we go right from the ranch to the consumer. It's just from us to the customer."

The unique strategy has people noticing and enjoying the food.

BVCC Executive Director Jodi Mitchell said Double K is amazing with the heart of all of it being the Double K Ranch.

"The really impressive thing about Dylan is that for being 30 years old, they have not only grown their business but have done it in a really responsible way and at a really responsible pace," Mitchell said. "His other businesses are helping boost his ranch. He is a really intelligent, energetic and wonderful person to have in the valley. He's a partner with our Agriculture and Local Foods committee. He's a great person who cares about agriculture and he's smart about what communities need."



"This is the food truck we started with, and this is where we realized we wanted to cook food for people," he said.



PHOTOS BY DOUG MCCONNAHA:

Dillon Kouf, in the sausage curing room at the Double K Ranch, is the Business Person of the Year as selected by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Thank you.

We continue to be touched and humbled by the way our community has walked beside us - step by step - as we TRY to build a better community to honor our son, Robert Leonardi.



NEW BUSINESS OF THE YEAR – EMBER

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce selection of the 2025 New Business of the Year is the Hamilton restaurant Ember, owned and operated by Brandon and Christina Dearden.

Christina Dearden said winning the award is special.

“Winning New Business of the Year is an incredible honor for Brandon and me,” she said. “We are truly humbled and grateful to be recognized by the community that has supported us from the very beginning. When we opened Ember, our goal was to create more than just a restaurant. We wanted to create a place where people could gather, celebrate, and enjoy exceptional food and genuine hospitality.” Jodi Mitchell, BVCC Executive Director, said EMBER is unique and special.

“They have filled a niche that we

don’t have here,” Mitchell said. “It is nice to have a special restaurant. They are community involved and they support local agriculture. They are putting Hamilton the map, for culinary. Brandon was on Top Chef, which is pretty impressive.”

Christina Dearden said, “This award belongs to our amazing team, whose hard work and dedication make everything we do possible, and to our local farmers, ranchers, and producers who inspire our menus every day.”

Dearden thanked the community.

“Your support, trust, and encouragement have allowed us to do what we love, and we are incredibly grateful to be part of this community,” Christina Dearden said. “We are honored by this recognition and look forward to continuing to serve you for many years to come.”



PHOTOS BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

Brandon and Christina Dearden own and operate EMBER in Hamilton. The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected EMBER as the 2025 New Business of the Year.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AWARD -

Kristina Berger, Director of Bitterroot College, UM

Kristina Berger, Director of Bitterroot College, has been selected by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce to receive the 2025 Economic Development Award.

Most of her work at Bitterroot College is focused on Workforce Development.

"I had the opportunity, over the last few years, to work with some amazing people," Berger said. "We put a collective together called 'Roots to Rise.' We've really been trying to tackle the workforce ecosystem here in the Bitterroot Valley - holistically."

The 'Roots to Rise' collective include the Bitterroot College, the University of Montana, Bitterroot Early Learning Center, the Bitterroot Chamber and the Council on Ag-

ing.

"We come together and try to solve some of the issues, challenges and barriers that we see with the workforce ecosystem," Berger said. "Sometimes that is childcare, we've recognized that housing is an issue - not that we've been able to solve that one - but we are aware of it."

Berger said this group has been "reaching out to player-partners to get information on how we can train better, what their needs are, what they are seeing from employees, if we can help with hiring practices, retention and recruitment."

She said that because Health Sciences have been the biggest need, that has been the main focus, but the collective engages

with employers from many industries.

"What we're offering is helping people to get better jobs, and the people who are hiring to have a good pipeline or pool to choose from," Berger said. "It's pretty rewarding work."

These meetings often result in specific education and training.

"I work a lot with Dual Enrollment," Berger said. "We've put in a lot of work at the University to make sure students just aren't taking random Dual Enrollment classes but that their college credit is on a pathway. That has had a lot of traction for workforce as well."

She just won a grant called "Education for Employment Pathway."

"We start with high school students but also have entry for adult learners as well, the pathway doesn't change," Berger said. "We also have implemented a Career Exploration class, and we use the YouScience aptitude test which is perfect for everyone to know more about themselves."

Jodi Mitchell, Director of the BVCC, said Berger works "tirelessly and quietly."

"[Berger] is doing her thing to try to connect schools with training opportunities for local jobs," Mitchell said. "She's got a lot of things going on right now - grant writing, etc. - to try to connect local businesses that need trained staff but also helping students and adults to get better training, to have a higher level of skills, and to get better jobs."

Berger agreed.

"I get to sit at the table and advocate for the Bitterroot," Berger said. "I'm very fortunate. We are an imbedded unity of the University. They see me as a trustworthy person to make recommendations as to what classes we should offer and how we should engage with the community. Missoula is very different [from the Bitterroot Valley]."



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

Bitterroot College employees Portia O'Connell, Program Lead for Apprenticeships; Jaime Middleton, Assistant Clinical Professor; Erin Rosenkrance, Adjunct Professor Anthropology and Native American Studies and GED (HiSet) examiner; Gail Simpson, LPN Program Director and Health Science Program Coordinator; Kristina Berger, Director of Bitterroot College; and Lily Apedaile, Director of Health Care Workforce Development.

I am honored to be named
business person of the year.

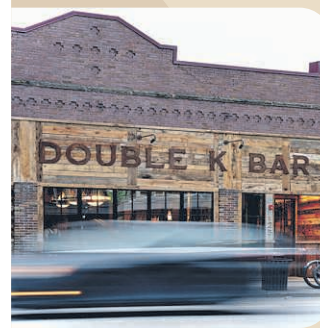
Stop by our locations
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Double K Ranch Bar, Now Open!

Full bar, beer on tap, serving delicious Smash Burgers and Pizza.
Located in Downtown Missoula, right next to the Wilma Theater.



UNSUNG HERO AWARD – Courtney Hartelius



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Courtney Hartelius, Executive Director of the Daly Mansion, for the 2025 Unsung Hero Award.

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Courtney Hartelius, Executive Director of the Daly Mansion, for the 2025 Unsung Hero Award.

Hartelius said she feels honored.

“It is an honor to be nominated for this award,” she said. “The Chamber is such an integral part of our community, and they do a tremendous amount of work to promote and strengthen our local business community, so to be recognized by them is very meaningful to me.”

Hartelius said she is humbled to be included in the list “of wonderful community members who have received this award before.”

“There are so many people who quietly give their time and energy to make Ham-

ilton and the Bitterroot Valley a better place,” Hartelius said. “I am grateful. I am not big about personal recognition, but it is really neat.”

She has been a Hamilton resident for 12 years.

“There is just something special about Hamilton and the Bitterroot Valley,” Hartelius said. “It is hard to put your finger on it, but I do think part of it comes from the way community members, businesses, nonprofits and organizations work together and genuinely support one another.”

When she first started volunteering in the community, she hoped it would reflect well on the Daly Mansion.

“When I was the mansion Events Coordinator, I wanted to show that we were an active member of the community and

“It is incredibly rewarding and so important. Communities don’t continue to thrive without people willing to get involved. When volunteers show up it means something. Do what you can to continue to make Hamilton and the Bitterroot Valley hold onto its specialness. I’m grateful to be part of this community.”

that we would support other organizations when we could,” Hartelius said. “I still hope that is a byproduct of being involved but over the years it has become more personal for me. I have developed real relationships with people, business and organizations that I’ve had the opportunity to work alongside.”

Her advice to the community is to find a reason to get involved.

“You don’t have to have a lot of time or

take on a huge commitment but find something you care about and show up when you can,” Hartelius said. “It is incredibly rewarding and so important. Communities don’t continue to thrive without people willing to get involved. When volunteers show up it means something. Do what you can to continue to make Hamilton and the Bitterroot Valley hold onto its specialness. I’m grateful to be part of this community.”



Ravalli Services
CORPORATION

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NON PROFIT OF THE YEAR

Congrats to our own Liliana Pennington as Spark Plug of the Year!



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VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR - Ryan Williams

Ryan Williams is the 2025 Volunteer of the Year as selected by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Williams said he has mixed emotions about being selected.

“When you volunteer a lot, you also see the other people who volunteer a whole bunch,” Williams said. “I think there are a lot of individuals who could have won it, but also it is nice to be recognized. I do enjoy volunteering. It is fun to help out with these events and see how many people enjoy them.”

He said that sometimes the volunteering is behind the scenes, but the reward of helping an event is still there. He usually helps with the Hamilton Downtown

Association, as he was on that Board and then the president.

“I’m usually there all day for their big events,” Williams said. “This is my first year not on their board. I feel that when you are a board member there is a bit of an obligation. This year I’m on the Chamber board so I did the Know Your Farmer dinner and the Brewfest and what not.”

Williams said he was selected as Volunteer of the Year because he’s well known.

“I think a lot of Chamber members are small-town-familiar faces,” he said. “I think the people who do the voting are around a lot of these events and they probably have seen me volunteering. They are like ‘you’re volunteering again?’”

Williams said he lives near downtown

Hamilton, which makes it easy for him to volunteer for Hamilton events.

BVCC Executive Director Jodi Mitchell said Williams is always volunteering, even at the last minute.

“For our Know Your Farmer dinner he was the last one I asked to volunteer, and

he was the last one to leave the event at like 11 p.m. He washed all the dishes – he did all the jobs no one really wanted to do, and he did it with a good attitude,” Mitchell said. “He volunteers all the time. This award is really well deserved.”

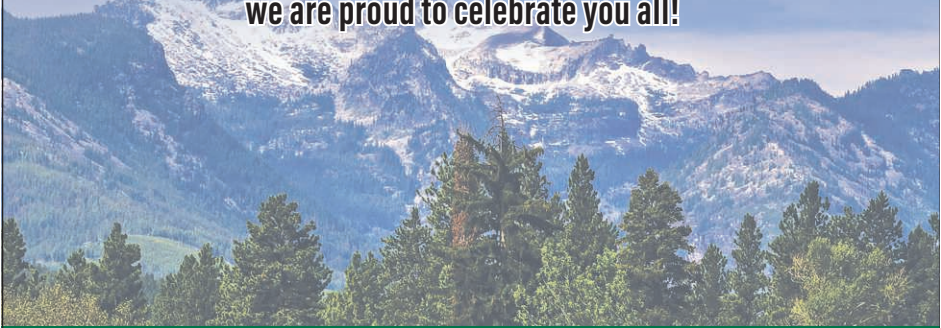
Ryan Williams is the 2025 Volunteer of the Year as selected by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.
PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA



Congratulations

to all Chamber Award winners and nominees!

Your contributions inspire and strengthen our community – we are proud to celebrate you all!



You make our community such a wonderful place to live and work.



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Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce





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Congratulations to all the Chamber Award winners!!



BUSINESS OF THE YEAR - Partners in Home Care

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Partners in Home Care as the 2025 Business of the Year.

Dyana Canavan, Partners in Home Care's Strategic Growth and Development Manager, said the BVCC award is meaningful.

"For nearly forty years our organization has been quietly caring for our neighbors across Western Montana," Canavan said. "We help people heal, recover, and spend life's most important moments at a place they want to be and are cared for – in their home."

Partners in Home Care offers seven different accredited lines of service – Home Health, Hospice, Palliative Care, Infusion Services, Home Medical Equipment and Home and Community Based Services. The business continues to grow and expand to meet the needs of Montanans.

Canavan described the business as services that are "clinically referred."

"Our goal is to keep people from being readmitted to the hospital – reducing re-admission rates," she said. "We provide person-centered care that keeps them in their homes."

She said Partners in Home Care business "truly cares as employees have passion for their jobs."

"Before the sun rises over the Bitterroot Mountains, a Partners in Home Care nurse may already be on the road traveling miles to help a patient recover safely after surgery," Canavan said. "A respiratory therapist may be fitting equipment that helps someone breathe easier. A hospice nurse may be sitting quietly beside a family member during one of the most difficult moments of their life – not because there is anything left to say but because no one should have to face those moments alone."

"Those are the moments that rarely make the news," Canavan said. "Those are the moments that define Partners in Home Care. This year that commitment was recognized by the BVCC – naming Partners in Home Care the 2025 Business of the Year. The award salutes businesses who are great and strengthen the communities they serve."

Corin Schneider, Chief Executive Officer of Partners in Home Care, said the award was an honor with extra meaning, "be-



PROVIDED PHOTO

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Partners in Home Care as the 2025 Business of the Year. Partners in Home Care, with more than 230 employees, serves six counties in Western Montana.

cause it comes from our own community."

"Our employees show up every day," Schneider said. "They have compassion, professionalism, and a genuine desire to help others – whether caring for families in their own home, supporting families through Hospice, delivering medical equipment, volunteering at a community event or working behind the scenes. This award belongs to every single one of us."

Partners in Home Care serves six counties in Western Montana, five of which are designated rural. With more than 230 employees, the organization provides over 100,000 patient visits each year, while clinicians travel nearly one million miles annually to deliver quality care in patients' homes.

"Partners in Home Care serves patients throughout the region," Canavan said. "Partners is also the clinical operating partner for the Hope Hospice Center in

Missoula."

She reinforced Partner's goals.

"While healthcare is at the heart of our organization, our mission expands far beyond medicine," Canavan said. "Our employees volunteer throughout Western Montana and the Bitterroot Valley. We help mentor emerging leaders, we serve on non-profit boards, we participate in Chamber events, work alongside local health care providers, as well as emergency responders, and community organizations who share similar interests of improving health."

She said that Partners in Home Care is a nonprofit.

"We are Western Montana's only non-profit in-home health care provider," Canavan said. "Every dollar that is earned is reinvested in patient care – because we are a non-profit."

Schneider, CEO, said the BVCC award was, "ultimately about trust."

"We've been welcomed into thousands of homes over the years," she said. "That is a responsibility we never take lightly. To be nominated by the community and selected by the Chamber's Board of Directors is incredibly humbling. We are grateful for the trust our patients, families, referral partners, and communities place in us every day. It is a privilege to serve Western Montana."

Tammy Mercer, Partners in Home Care Executive Director of Clinical Services, said the employees are compassionate.

"Awards eventually find a place on a shelf, our work continues the very next morning," Mercer said. "Before sunrise another nurse will drive down a country road, a therapist will knock on a front door, another family will receive comfort during an uncertain time. For Partners in Home Care that has never been about winning an award – it is simply what neighbors do for neighbors."

NONPROFIT OF THE YEAR - Ravalli Services

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Ravalli Services as the 2025 Nonprofit of the Year.

Ravalli Services Corporation promotes inclusion and integration.

Ravalli Services Managing Director Jessica Warnken said winning the award feels good.

"I am really excited for us," Warnken said. "We work really hard to be a positive impact on our community. It is great that we are being recognized, and people know who we are. It is exciting."

Ravalli Services is a non-profit agency that works with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In the Bitterroot Valley, Ravalli Services serves over 70 individuals.

Ravalli Services assists clients in finding jobs in the community, takes them to medical appointments, helps them with meals, medication management, and the activities of daily living. Ravalli Services provides group homes, owns four group homes that are staffed 24/7, and a supported living home where more capable individuals are living on their own.

"All of our homes house 5-8 individuals, and we also support individuals living in the community that are renting from community members or that might live with their family members," Warnken said.

Ravalli Services also has a work center.

"We run a thrift store," Warnken said. "The individuals in our services do all the work behind the thrift store and some work inside the thrift store."

Ravalli Services clients take in donations, process and price the items, and get those items to the sales floor of the thrift store.

"We pay them working wage to do those activities, so we are providing meaningful work experience for them, in-house," Warnken said. "We also have a day program."

Ravalli Services has two programs that provide programs for people who are retired or not able to work. The day program has enrichment activities like making cookies, taking outings in the communities, crafts like making jewelry, painting rocks, screen printing, and building fire-starter kits, many of these items are for sale. Clients have been working at Farmers Markets and making dirty sodas and lotus drinks.

"One of the biggest things Ravalli Services that sets us apart is that we have a robust community," Warnken said. "We

have what I call a 'Trips Program' where we take our clients on trips. We believe we need to help people make memories and make connections. It is difficult when you live with, work with and do activities with all the same people."

The trips start with plenty of exploration, idea generation and planning to fulfill big bucket-list adventures. Las Vegas, Disneyland, Tennessee, San Diego, Arizona, and Texas have been exciting and rewarding trips.

"We work really hard and staff those trips," Warnken said. "It's probably the most exciting and rewarding part of job - to see our clients experience what otherwise they would never be able to experience."

The trips are funded with Thrift Store sales, individual donations and sponsors.

Warnken said Ravalli Services is expanding.

"There is a wait-list miles long for individuals to get into services," she said. "Unfortunately, housing is a huge concern. There is just no affordable housing here. The individuals that we serve are on restricted income. They receive Social Security funds; they can only work so many hours and are only allowed to have so many funds as assets."

Intense behaviors and mental health disorders are also barriers.

"If you walked past these individuals, you might not even know they had a disability but maybe just a little bit rough around the edges," Warnken said. "We serve quite a few of those individuals, so they need the right type of housing."

Ravalli Services is merging with Flathead Industries. Warnken now oversees the client services in Hamilton, Missoula, and Plains.

"I travel quite a bit to work with clients in all these areas," Warnken said.

Income comes from Medicaid, Montana, the Thrift Stores in these towns, individual donations and sponsors.

Jodi Mitchell, Executive Director of BVCC, said Ravalli Services is involved in the community and quiet about what they do.

"They do a lot," Mitchell said. "A lot of people think they are just a thrift store. They employ over 100 people in the Bitterroot Valley. They have group homes, counselors, and are getting clients into the workforce. They get the businesses to be more inclusive and have mentors at the business to make sure they are doing the job well."



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

Ravalli Services - Day Activities Center in Hamilton. Clients and staff: Jim Weir, Corinne Copland, Jenny Coyne, Brian Roy, Nicole Christensen (DAC Manager), Gary Rall, Betty Duffy, Chelsie Pilecki, Karen Gold, and Miriam Schwer completed the enrichment activity craft of bleach and tie-dye.

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SPARK PLUG AWARD - Liliana Pennington

The Spark Plug Award is given to someone who inspires the community with great thoughts, effort, and enthusiasm. The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Liliana Pennington as the winner of the 2025 Spark Plug Award.

Pennington said she feels “beyond

elated” to be the winner.

“It is a huge honor,” she said. “I love that they even have this award because there are some big cheerleaders in this community and to be with some of those names is exciting for me.”

Jodi Mitchell, Executive Director of the BVCC, said, she loves Liliana “because she

never says no.”

“If I need someone to volunteer right now, I just call her,” Mitchell said. “Everything she volunteers for, she gives 110%. The only pace she has is go-go-go. She volunteers with spunk and enthusiasm. She likes to help.”

Pennington said her best friends are “non-providers.”

“We joke that none of us can say no,” she said. “Every year we make New Year’s resolutions to say ‘no,’ but we fail every year. I joke with the mayor [Hamilton Mayor Dominic Farrenkopf] that there’s a certain endorphin in your brain that

pops whenever you volunteer and do service. That’s why I think I’m my happiest in my career right now – I work for Ravalli Services, and I love just being able to give back to the community.”

Pennington serves on the board of the Bitter Root Humane Association, is a Chamber Ambassador, and has helped on events and committees for the Hamilton Downtown Association. She has a seven-year-old, has a full-time/expanding job and is always volunteering.

“I like a lot on my plate,” she said. “It is so exiting when the community comes together.”

“It is a huge honor,” she said. “I love that they even have this award because there are some big cheerleaders in this community and to be with some of those names is exciting for me.”



PROVIDED PHOTO

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Liliana Pennington as the winner of the 2025 Spark Plug Award.

**Shoutout to our incredible
Chamber Award winners!**

*You’re rocking it — leading, inspiring,
and making big things happen.
Let’s keep the momentum going!*

The Paper Clip

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LAUREL AWARD -

Jean Schurman

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Jean Schurman to receive the Laurel Award, an annual community service honor presented in memory of Mayor Laurel Hegstad [Deschamps] who served as the Hamilton Mayor for nine years. Jean Schurman said she is honored with the award.

"I didn't know Mayor Laurel, but I knew of her," Schurman said. "I knew she was really involved, and it is an honor to be awarded in her name."

Schurman said she started volunteering when she was young.

"I started in 4H, then was a leader in 4H for 20 years, so spent about 30 years in 4H," Schurman said. "But even in high school I was on a volunteer committee when Trapper Peak first came in, and I was a student advisor on their board."

Schurman said she always found time to donate.

"I was working at the newspaper [Bitterroot Star] and selling advertising - you have to network and volunteering is a good way to do it," she said. "I enjoyed it. I think I got started by volunteering on the committee for Brewfest. Previously, I had volunteered through 4H but not in the community"

Schurman said she was on the Ravalli County Fair Board for six years and was on the Rodeo Committee for 12 or 13 years.

"But that was a way for me to get back to my roots," she said. "I grew up rodeoing. For the last 13 years I put on barrel racing for breast cancer awareness and donated to Chicks and Chaps which helps people going through breast cancer - if they need money for tires, or other non-medical stuff. This is the first year I'm not doing it."

Schurman said she became more selective on her volunteering efforts.

"You can get spread too thin," she said. "Volunteering is fun and it has given me such a wide appreciation of the valley and



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

Jean Schurman has been selected for the 2025 Laurel Award by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce. Sherman is standing in the grandstands of the Ravalli County Rodeo Arena with the Sky Boxes behind her.

extended my circle of friends immeasurably. I met so many people by volunteering. That is truly a reward."

BVCC Director Jodi Mitchell said Schurman was known in every community in the Bitterroot Valley.

"We thought it would be a really great

way to celebrate Jean," Mitchell said. "She is a person that at some point it time could have run every single one of our awards. She probably did in her lifetime. She was just a part of everything, everywhere. She was involved in every community, and you don't see that very often."



*Congratulations,
Ryan Williams!*

Ryan proved his volunteer spirit the day he arrived in our valley. He continues to make us proud with the Chamber's "Volunteer of the Year Award." Thank you, Ryan for your continued contributions!

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COMMUNITY ASSET AWARD -

Play Like Robert Foundation

The Play Like Robert Foundation was selected for the 2025 Community Asset award by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.

In 2019, Phil and Alyce Leonardi lost their son, Robert A. Leonard, to a hit-and-run driver on Golf Course Road. That week a run was held with over 200 community members participating to show their support. The family created an annual event called "Robert's Run." The Play Like Robert Foundation was created to connect people through learning, play, and the courage to try. The non-profit provides philanthropic support for special projects and programs, promoting a strong sense of inclusion and fair play.

Alyce Leonardi said the 2025 BVCC award is appreciated.

"It was very, very kind of Jodi [Mitchell, BVCC Executive Director] and whoever picked," she said. "I feel surprised and honored that the community is recognizing the work we are trying to do and that our effort is not going unnoticed."

Robert's Run is the foundation's biggest fundraiser. The 2026 Robert's Run was held August 1, in Hamilton with a record number of over 1,300 participants in the 10k race, 5k race, 1 mile race, and festival. The 2026 Run Ambassador was Courtney Frerichs.

Over the past five years, the Play Like Robert Foundation has donated over \$141,000 to community projects and local youth sports. Completed projects include Daly Elementary School, Hamilton Middle School Bronc Corral, Bitterroot Aquatic Center Playground Monkey Bars, Corvallis Track & Field Shot Put & Discus Rings, a Corvallis Little Lending Library, Bitterroot Public Library - Animal Wonders Sponsorship, Robert's Room Exhibit in the Glasgow Children's Museum, Shot Clock Donations to six valley public schools, Junior Olympics - South Bitterroot - Uniforms, and more.

"We also have been trying to create an endowment so the foundation can continue far past Phil and I," Alyce said. "With the Run, not only are we doing the project donations and the endowment, but our latest and greatest push is doing a trail system."

The Play Like Robert Foundation's non-motorized trail project starts on Golf Course Road and will go throughout Hamilton to make the community safer for children and

families. The project, called the "One Step at a Time Campaign," will be accomplished in three phases.

Phase 1, to be completed in 2028, is a partnership with Ravalli County and the Montana Department of Transportation, that creates a 1-mile ADA accessible trail from the south entrance of Robert's Trail on Golf Course Road, taking a right on Kurtz Lane and ending at Daly Elementary school.

Phase 2, also to be completed in 2028, is a partnership with the City of Hamilton. The trail will run along Marcus Street to Main Street (and Silverberry to Big Corral Road).

Phase 3, currently underway with a completion date of this fall. The trail called "Whetstone Crossing," will connect Golf Course Road to Tammany by Canyons Athletic Club along county land that is used for the airport.

"That is special because it sits on the old Leonardi property that Phil's dad sold to the county back in the 1990s," Alyce said. "That trail will be crushed gravel and connect the southern entrance to Robert's Trail, down Golf Course a little bit, and then head north to the Canyons. When it is all done by 2028 or 2029, I can see us having three to four miles of trails going in, that includes the original Robert's Trail. It will connect the southeast side of Hamilton and can bring you to downtown."

Donations can be made online at <https://www.playlikerobert.org/>

"We never thought we'd be in the Trail business, but it morphed into that," Alyce Leonardi said. "It's the beauty of Robert's Foundation and the community support. We're just trying to make Hamilton a better place to live, safer for bikers, walkers, runners, and kids in general, and make those improvements."

She said she enjoys being asked to participate in different projects.

"It is fun to be asked," Alyce said. "It is nice to be known in the community, to be able to help. It is nice to be a Community Asset."

BVCC Executive Director Jodi Mitchell called the Play Like Robert Foundation "amazing"

"They just do so much for the safety of kids, and they put in hard work in such a short amount of time," Mitchell said. "They help promote safety and activities for our youth."



PHOTO PROVIDED

Alyce Leonardi, Phil Leonardi, Heidi Martin and Robin Pruitt are board members of the Play Like Robert Foundation that was selected for the 2025 Community Asset award by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Congratulations to this year's award winners!

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AMBASSADOR OF THE YEAR - Erica Staat

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has selected Erica Staat as the 2025 Ambassador of the Year.

Erica Staat is the Employee Coordinator at A2Z Personnel where just over a year ago the staff was talking about how they wanted to get more involved when it comes to Chamber events.

"My boss, Jaime, encouraged me to become an ambassador," Staat said. "At the time I was hesitant, but I gave it a shot and was really glad that I did. I've been able to meet really neat people and have more connections throughout the valley from being part of the ambassador program."

Staat described an Ambassador as doing a bit of everything.

"Basically, we show up," she said. "The Chamber puts on regular events throughout the month so, we attend ribbon cuttings, Chamber Luncheons, Chamber After Hours events where there is networking. At those events we do extra volunteering – greeting people, collecting business cards, helping to hold the ribbon or whatever it is. We volunteer at special events too."

She listed Bitterroot Brewfest, and Chamber events where Ambassadors help plan logistics and decorations then attend and enjoy the businesses and community members.

Staat said she was surprised to be selected Ambassador of the Year.

"Especially since I'm newer to the program," she said. "I am very honored. It is super fun to work with Jodi and Dawn – they are awesome."



PHOTO BY DOUG MCCONNAHA

Erica Staat, Employee Coordinator at A2Z Personnel, has been selected as the 2025 Ambassador of the Year by the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce.



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