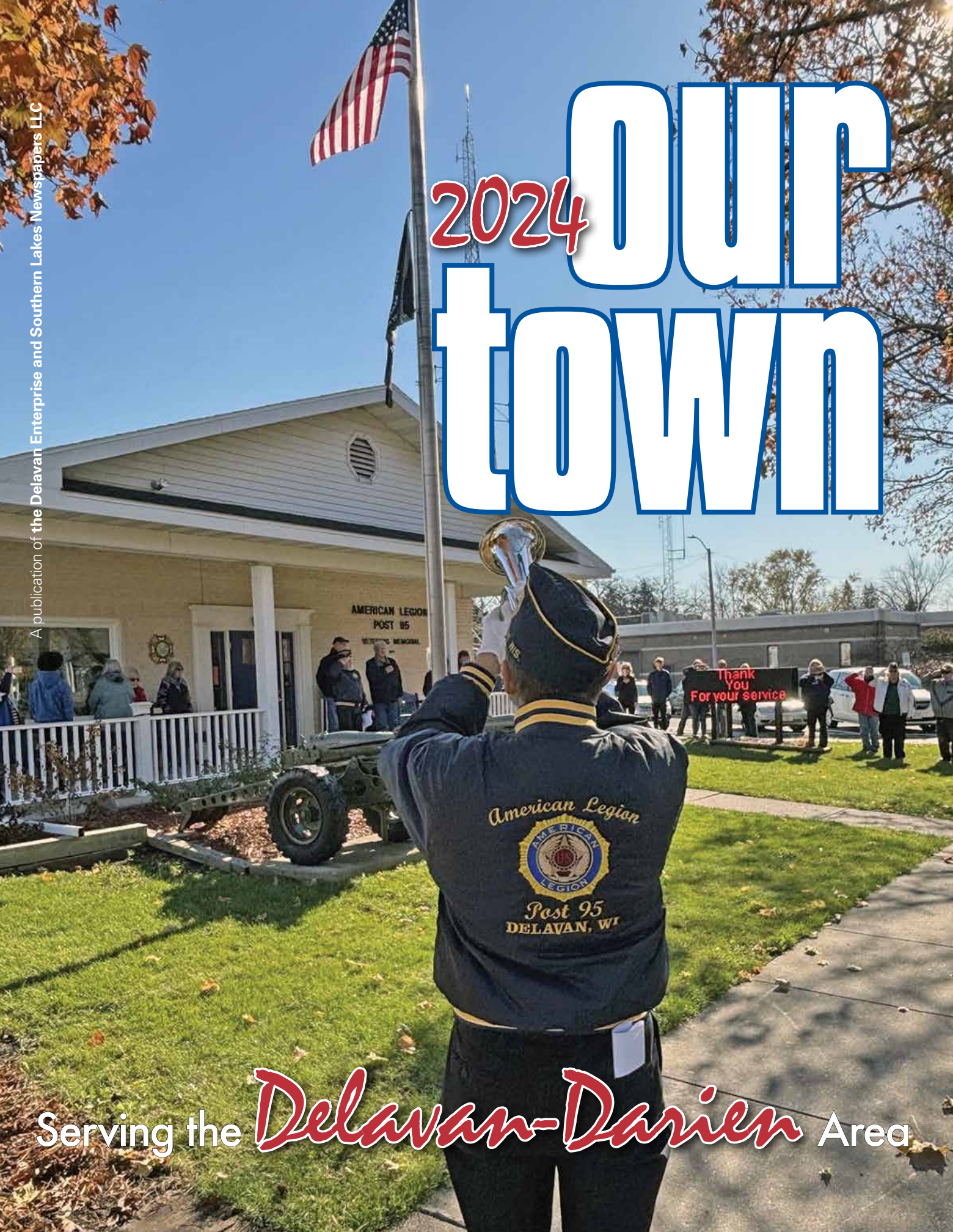


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The City of Delavan hosts its annual Cinco de Mayo celebration at Phoenix Park. Numerous performers and dancers take part in the festivities, while vendors for both food, consumers and crafts flood the park. **above:** A large audience gather to watch the jalapeno eating contest. **at left:** Traditional Mexican food is a big part of the festival.

JENNIFER EISENBART *Our Town*

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS, *Welcome to Delavan!*

Greetings, to those who already call Delavan home, those who once lived here and will always call this area their home, and to those who are considering our community as a place to reside, work, or visit in the future.

As mayor, I am honored to have been raised here, and to now represent thousands of families similar to my very own in the City of Delavan. As many individuals can already attest to we are a community proud of our past history, and know strategic programs and policies put in place now will benefit future generations in the years ahead.

We are fortunate to have stakeholder organizations like the Delavan-Delavan Lake Chamber of Commerce/Visit Delavan, the Lions Club, Delavan Service League, the local library, and others who are strong partners in our efforts to encourage economic investment, business expansion, tourism, residential growth, and a quality of life that makes our

community prosperous for all.

Delavan is a welcoming, vibrant, sustainable destination city. The city council, city staff, and myself are working hard together to encourage the kind of community investment and smart growth that will lead to a higher quality of life for all Delavan families.

Many of us are alumni of DDHS, have raised kids who went through the schools, or are raising kids now that currently attend the district. I'm excited to continue the strong partnership between the city, our school board officials, a new school administrator, and teachers to offer our kids the best education environment possible.

We've made great strides in recent years to give our Police, Fire, and EMS services the tools and resources necessary to protect and keep us all safe in Delavan. No doubt that will remain a priority as we know our citizens value that commitment and new residents look for those safety procedures

in place when choosing a community to reside in.

Delavan has grown, and will continue to do so. Yet, I'm confident we'll never lose our small city charm where we know our neighbors, and help look after those most in need. Those qualities have made us love Delavan so much in the past, presently, and in the future.

If you aren't already familiar

with Delavan, we invite you to visit during one of our many community events this year. Enjoy a stay with us and discover what has made Delavan unique all these years, and what sets our community above the rest.

Sincerely,

Ryan J. Schroeder

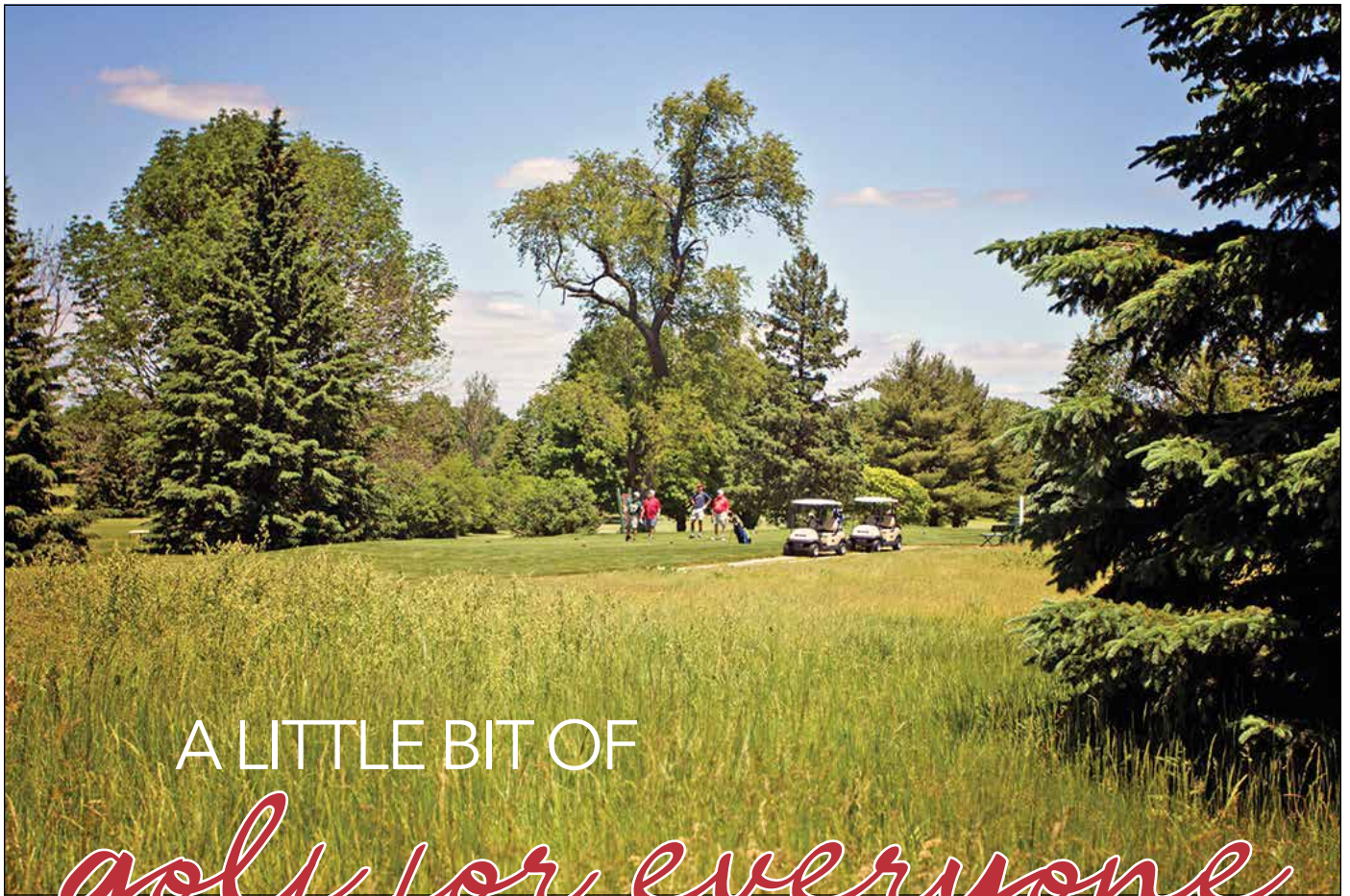
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2024 Delavan-Darien **our town**

A publication of The Enterprise & Southern Lakes Newspapers
1102 Ann St., Delavan, WI 53115 • (262) 728-3411

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Community Editor:..... Jennifer Eisenbart
Creative Director: Heidi Schulz
Advertising Director: Vicki Vanderwerff
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A LITTLE BIT OF

golf for everyone

Flexible nature of 9-hole courses at Delbrook make it playable for all

By **Jennifer Eisenbart**

EDITOR

Nestled out on the edges of the City of Delavan is a golf course that has been around for almost 100 years, yet still offers something new.

Delbrook Golf Course opened in July of 1928 with 18 holes of golf. But in 2001, those holes were renovated into three 9-hole courses – the North, Middle and South – with a combination of the two available for 18 holes any given week and the third as a nine-hole course.

It is the only municipality-owned golf course in Walworth County, and PGA

Pro and Manager Dan Piecha knows it is something special.

“All three courses have some holes from the original layout and also some holes from the expansion,” Piecha explained. “There’s a mix of traditional and modern design.”

The course also features Greenie’s Clubhouse, an on-site restaurant that offers a full breakfast, lunch and dinner menu as well as Monday and Saturday cookouts that feature grilled outdoor favorites.

Piecha said the way everything is set up at Delbrook, it offers a little something for everyone.

“It’s all over the place,” Piecha said when asked to describe the age groups attracted to the course. “We have our retired folks, people still working, people with young families. We have a good amount of junior golfers.”

One of those junior golfers made a name for himself last year, RJ Jordan. After a stellar WIAA high school season that saw the senior just miss qualifying for state, Jordan won the club championship in

August.

He also shot a career-low 71 at Delbrook to win a Southern Lakes Conference “major” last spring. Now Jordan plays for Madison’s Edgewood College team. That kind of exposure from one athlete, Piecha said, is what builds junior golf.

“I think anything with high-school age (athletes), there has to be one or two instigators, getting the other kids involved,” Piecha said. “We’re seeing a resurgence of that over the last couple of years.”

It also doesn’t hurt that Delbrook’s courses are flexible and affordable. A full seven-day-a-week season golf pass is available for \$700, and a junior pass is available for \$150.

The highest green fee for Delbrook is in the middle of summer at \$60, which includes a cart. In addition, the driving range is popular, Piecha said, with three sizes of buckets of balls – \$5, \$7 and \$12 – or a season pass for \$225. Having a season golf pass drops that down to \$150.

Another major selling point, Piecha said, is accessibility.

Golfers get ready to tee off at the No. 2 South hole at Delbrook Golf Course in Delavan. Each week, the club pairs two of the nine-hole courses into the 18-hole course for the week, with the other nine making a 9-hole.

SUBMITTED PHOTO *Our Town*

“With 27 holes, we can usually find a spot around the time people want to play,” he explained. “The course is playable for all skill levels, but it’s still challenging for lower-handicapped golfers.”

There is also that blend of traditional and modern holes that Piecha mentioned. With traditional holes, “you see more tree-lined fairways,” he said. With a modern design, he added, there’s more length to holes and greens are larger.

The final selling point, Piecha said, is the condition of the courses.

“A lot of long-time passholders come back and say they’ve never seen it in such good condition,” he explained. “And that continues year after year.”

Delbrook also features a pro shop on site as well as the restaurant. The shop is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, with hours being adjusted as the season goes on.

Delbrook Golf Course is at 700 S. Second St., Delavan. The course’s website is delbrookgolfclub.com, where golfers can book tee times for any day of the week, and the phone number is 262-728-3966.

Greenie’s Clubhouse can be reached by calling 262-728-1339. Clubhouse hours are Monday through Thursday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., Friday 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sunday from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.



above: The green at No. 9 South at Delbrook Golf Course has both water and trees in play.
below: The South Course’s No. 2 hole has plenty of trees surrounding the green. Delbrook Golf Course, 700 S. Second St., Delavan, offers 27 holes of golf.

SUBMITTED PHOTO *Our Town*



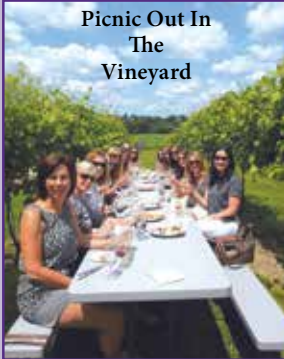
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A Scary good time

Downtown Delavan plays host to the annual Scarecrow Fest celebration each September, with the area closed off for scarecrows, vendors, performers and more along Main Street. In addition, new additions to the Delavan Historical Society Hall of Fame are announced. **at left:** The Gebel Girls – Rachel and Micah, from left – get into the spirit of the event. **below, left:** Mayor Ryan Schroeder, Municipal Judge Tim Sturdevant and City of Delavan Alderman Luis Solis announce the new Hall of Fame inductees. **below:** A petting zoo is available at Aram Public Library for children. **bottom:** A duck raffle is held in the fountain of Tower Park, which garnered the attention of many youngsters.

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The Walworth County Board of Supervisors meets the second Tuesday of the month at 3:30 p.m. in the County Board Room of the Walworth County Government Center, 100 W. Walworth St., Elkhorn.

Meeting dates and times may vary therefore, it's advised to contact the County Clerk's Office at (262) 741-4241 to confirm meetings.

For more information about county government, visit co.walworth.wi.us

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Deputy County Clerk
Susi Pike

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Come out to the fair!

The Walworth County Fair offers a little something for everyone, from milk-chugging contests to carnival rides to fair food to entertainment. The 2024 Walworth County Fair takes place the week leading up to Labor Day, and will run from Aug. 28 through Sept. 2 this year. For more information, go to www.walworthcountyfairgrounds.com.

JENNIFER EISENBART *Our Town*

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Remembering those who served

Volunteers planted arborvitae, blue butterfly bushes and red and white roses at the new Veterans Memorial Garden at Congdon Gardens last May. The new space was dedicated that weekend, honoring all veterans of the armed forces with a special space at Congdon.

DAVE DRESLOW *Our Town*

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• CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

Local singer spends time on national stage

By **Jennifer Eisenbart**

EDITOR

For eight glittering, gratifying, glorious weeks, Rachel Christine Gebel got to experience life as a star.

The Delavan resident and Burlington native saw her time on NBC's *The Voice* come to an end in May of last year, as the singer came up short of advancing out of the playoff rounds to the live show rounds.

Gebel offered up a summary of her time on the show on Facebook:

"That's a wrap for Rae Rae on *The Voice*," Gebel wrote. She later added: "Now that my *Voice* era is officially over, I'd like to say THANK YOU. To everyone who watched and supported this entire journey. You have made this experience so incredible. Blinds, Battles, Knockouts, and Playoffs the support was unbelievable. To be given a platform like this as a singer, to represent Wisconsin, and encourage other small town singers to put themselves out there! If you're thinking about trying out for a singing show, I can personally say *The Voice* was WORTH IT. Again and alwayssss, thank you, with all my heart, THANK YOU."

Gebel recorded the show out in California last fall, and had a chance to perform four different songs on national TV. She auditioned with "Uninvited" by Alanis Morissette, then won her Battle Round against Team Kelly teammate JB Somers



Rachel Christine Gebel performs Paramore's "The Only Exception" during the playoff rounds of NBC's *The Voice*. Gebel was eventually eliminated from the show.

TYLER GOLDEN/NBC *Our Town*

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

Gebel siblings make most out of making music together

By **Jennifer Eisenbart**

EDITOR

It's a quiet Saturday evening at the Delavan Lake Store and Lounge in Delavan. A handful of spectators wander in for the 7 p.m. show, though not many.

Micah and Rachel Gebel shrug it off, knowing they are competing with college football and colder temperatures.

Soon, though, the two take to the piano and the sound system at the lounge, flowing artfully from song to song, mixing country with pop, pop with blues, blues with whatever the two sisters have in mind.

It is a musical act born of family, born of a love for music – and born out of sisterly love. It's never been – and never will be – a rivalry.

"There's never been competition between us," explained Micah.

Added Rachel: "we've always had a teamwork effort with music. Never been a competition – always a mutual respect for creating and playing music."

The Gebel Girls have become a popular local act. The two have booked every Saturday with an act through the end of the year. Their full schedule can be found at gebelgirls.com.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The two sisters come from a musical family. Their mother, Micki, has performed in a number of different bands – even the family band, Markstock, which features, among others, her brothers.

For the two sisters, music began at a very young age.

"I must've been 5 and we would do karaoke at home in the house together," Rachel said. "It clicked. She taught me harmonies and we blended well."

The two grew up with vocal music – and ended up following each other in two very important gigs. Micah won the Riverport Chorus' DivaQuest competition when she was a freshman in high school in 2011, singing "Blue Skies" by Ella Fitzgerald.

"I wanted to finish second so I could

perform the next year," commented Micah about her somewhat surprising win. "

Rachel was 11 when Micah won and was intrigued.

"I looked up to her like she was a celebrity," Rachel said. On her first try at the event, Rachel finished third, singing "Ain't No Other Man," by Christina Aguilera.

The following year, Rachel showed up with "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," a take on the Sara Bareilles' vision.

This time, Rachel won. Her biggest cheerleader was her sister.

"Winning a few years later was the best feeling in the world and I felt like I made her proud by following her footsteps," said Rachel, something Micah confirmed. "In the video of me singing my song that night, you can hear her in the background going, 'do yo hang, honey!'"

The two then were the back-to-back lead singers for Burlington High School's

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 13

unique take on a pep band – Orange Crush. Micah was the lead singer when the group started in 2010 school year, while Rachel was the lead when the group ended seven years later.

Rather than providing a traditional pep band for BHS home basketball games, the school – led by teachers Ron Pedersen and Rob Stoughton – put together a house rock band.

The two said that the experience was invaluable.

“We owe Rod and Ron a lot. They taught us a lot about working with a band and that was their goal for the band,” Micah said. “I think we learned a lot about ourselves in Orange Crush.”

Added Rachel, “It was such a blessing to get to be a part of something like that at such a young age. You learn stage presence, stage banter, sooo many songs, and more.”

A MIX OF SOUND

While both sisters have continued to perform since graduation – both in at least two different groups – they’ve also discovered a lot about how they sound singing together.

Both are altos, but the current gig of singing together harkens back to their childhood.

“It’s nice to just screw around on the piano with my sister,” Micah explained. “Feels like home when we used to jam on the piano at home growing up.”

Added Rachel, “We’d always grown up singing together and after we both took piano lessons, we would learn songs together. Neither of us can read music very well so we taught each other along the way how to play and make music by ear.”

But as their relationship as sisters has grown, so has their ability to make music together. While Rachel leans more toward country and pop, Micah leans more toward jazz.

When they sing together, nothing is slated or rehearsed. One will nudge the other and suggest a song, and whoever is leading on the piano makes a split-second decision on the next song to blend into.



Out on the Fourth of July

The City of Delavan celebrated the 2023 Fourth of July with several events including a parade through downtown and, later that night, a concert and fireworks at Phoenix Park. At left: Micah Gebel sings the national anthem in spite of the rain.

DAVE DRESLOW *Our Town*

An example? At The Delavan Lake Store show, the two started with the song, “Fall in Line” by Christine Aguilera. The two blended various harmonies together, sometimes riffing on the music, switching seamlessly between the two of them. As the song finished, a few notes of piano transitioned immediately into, “Because He Cheats” by Carrie Underwood.

The second song finished to a loud round of applause.

“Split-second decision,” said Rachel. “We read the crowd to see if we should stay upbeat or relaxed. I’ll play one chord and she’s already looking up the lyrics because she knows what it is.”

THE FUTURE

Both Micah and Rachel hope to remain

involved in music. Rachel said she is writing her own music, and would like to get into music production/

Micah, meanwhile, said she is “Really wanting to sing in a big band in the future,” and sing swing and jazz.

But one thing will remain constant, regardless of what the future holds for either. Perhaps Rachel said it best.

“I can’t answer for Micah but we’ve always had a teamwork effort with music,” Rachel explained. “Never been a competition always a mutual respect for creating and playing music. Even if we perform separately, we’ve always been supportive of each other.

“We take pride in the music legacy our family left for us and love to share it with others.

THE VOICE • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

with the song “Light On.”

In the knockout rounds, Gebel performed Fleetwood Mac classic “Rhiannon,” but lost to Holly Brand on her coach Kelly Clarkson’s decision.

Gebel was then picked up as a steal by Blake Shelton – his last ever on the show – and performed the song “The Only Exception” by Paramore.

While Gebel earned praise for the song, her Team Blake teammates Noivas and Grace West advanced.

Gebel’s mother, Micki Gebel, offered some insight on her daughter’s time on the

show. She said that while the contestants were technically in competition with one another, the support for each other was certainly apparent.

“I think that’s one of the biggest takeaways I have from that particular show is the competition was only there for each of them with their self,” she explained. “It didn’t seem to be with each other.”

Micki said that with Rachel’s act with her sister, Micah, taking off (The Gebel Girls), she is thrilled to see both her daughters thriving.

“I never get tired of hearing those two

sing together,” Micki said. “Micah has an amazing voice. I hope the world gets to hear her as well. And Rachel hopes the same thing for her.”

She added that Rachel really wants to work in music production.

“She’s one of the most creative people I’ve ever known,” Micki said. “And I always tell her she’s one of the funniest people I’ve ever known.

“She loves to sing. That’s her happy place, but for her career, I think she wants to be behind the scenes doing the writing, doing the producing.”

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Still putting on a **SHOW**

Delavan played an important role in circus history

By **Sandra Landen Machaj**
CORRESPONDENT

Many people likely remember sitting in a circus tent – munching on popcorn, cotton candy, or drinking pink lemonade – and hearing the ringmaster’s loud voice say, “Ladies and Gentlemen and children of all ages,” as he opened the most spectacular show on earth.

While the circus was the most exciting event that occurred each summer for many communities in the days before television, computers and video games gained our children’s attention, many do not realize that the history of the circus.

Although it was originally founded on the east coast, there was also a notable Wisconsin history dating back as far as the mid 1800s, when the Mabie Brothers made Delavan the winter home of their popular event, the “Grand Olympic Circus.”

The Mabies began their circus in 1841 with partner Nathan Howes. The circus traveled around the eastern seaboard, as far north as Nova Scotia and the southern portion of eastern Canada. When Howes left the circus in 1846, Jeremiah and Edmund Mabie increased the circus’s routes and traveled as far south and west as New Orleans and St. Louis.

While on a trip that took him through southern Illinois in 1857, President Abraham Lincoln was said to have attended the circus



above: It isn’t a circus without the clowns that use a variety of ways to make people laugh including some of the whimsical vehicles on display at Circus World Museum. **top:** Elephants have been a feature since being introduced to the Ringling Bros Circus in 1888.

COURTESY WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY *Our Town*

in Alton, Ill., according to Delavan resident and past postmaster, the late W. Gordon Yadon, who was also known as Delavan’s historian.

Though the circuses usually wintered in New York, in 1847, the Mabies changed their winter plans and decided to winter in Wisconsin, specifically in Delavan. Purchasing 400 acres of open land – for \$3,700 – offered the Mabies ample space to pasture their animals while Delavan Lake assured plenty of fresh water for the animals and members of the circus. That land is now home to Lake Lawn Resort.

The circus traveled by wagons, pulled by horses, or sometimes elephants. The circus was not originally welcome in Delavan, as

a community that was founded in 1836 as a Baptist Temperance Colony considered circus people undesirable. Still the Mabie brothers engrained themselves in the community by becoming generous church members and began to take an active role in town government.

Home to many circuses

Other circuses made their way to Wisconsin to winter for much the same reasons: open land, water supply and availability of food for all. It was not long until many other circuses found their way to Wisconsin. While 26 circuses eventually

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

made the Delavan area their home, more than 100 different circuses made their way to Wisconsin, making it the most popular place for circuses to stay during the winter.

There are many stories about the circus in Delavan, particularly the Mabies and while many are true, some may be legends. For the Mabies, these include the story of their elephants, Romeo and Juliet. Romeo was described as a violent elephant that was said to have killed five trainers. Whether truth or folklore isn't known for certain but there is record that he was sold to another circus.

Juliet was described as gentle and a favorite of visitors. She was said to have passed away in the middle of winter. The next logical question is, what does one do with a dead elephant during a Wisconsin winter when the ground is frozen? History says she was placed out on the frozen lake and the ice was cut around her, allowing her to sink to the bottom.

Pink lemonade was said to

have been created by a clown in the Mabie Circus. It was made not with lemons as one might expect but by mixing tartaric acid with water and sugar. Clown Pete Conklin then mixed it in a vat that had been used by another performer to dye her costume. The vat had not been properly cleaned and as a result the lemonade became pink lemonade. The taste was the same so they sold it and it was such a success that they continued to make it but used food coloring in place of dye.

Today there is little left of the circus in Delavan except for the statues of an elephant, clown and giraffe in the city park on Walworth Street downtown Delavan. The International Clown Hall of Fame – which opened in Delavan in 1987 – moved to Milwaukee in 1995. The hope was to attract more visitors although they reported 13,000 visitors in 1989. The Museum, which honored inductees such as Red Skelton, Emmett Kelly, and Felix Adler, left Milwaukee for Baraboo in



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2004 where it remains.

Honored for its history

Delavan was recognized for its importance to circus history when it was chosen as the place the first day cover would be issued of the U.S. Postal Service's 5-cent stamp depicting a clown to honor the American Circus.

"We were proud to be chosen over Baraboo, Bridgeport, Ct, Somers, NY, and Sarasota and Venice, FL.," the late W. Gordon Yadon said.

The day was a major circus event with a parade through town, a circus in the high school gym, and a banquet commemorating the circus in Delavan. The two-day celebration welcomed 24,000 attendees.

The city was also recognized for its role in the development of the circus in 1948 when the State Circus Centennial was awarded to Delavan as part of the 100-year statehood celebration. And, in 1970, Delavan was hosted the centennial event commemorating the P.T. Barnum Circus' 100-year anniversary.

The P.T. Barnum Circus also made its home in Delavan until it went into bankruptcy and was purchased by the Ringling Brothers Circus. It became part of the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, which was headquartered in Baraboo.

Circus World history

Baraboo was also making its name in circus history. Home of the famed Ringling Brothers Circus founded by five of the seven Ringling brothers, it began as a small show doing skits, juggling and other activities that expanded into a one ring show in 1884 and continued to grow.

They eventually purchased the Barnum and Bailey Show, which had made its home in Delavan. This led to it becoming the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Baily show, advertised as the Greatest Show on Earth.

"The circuses originally traveled by circus wagons pulled by horses or other animals," said Scott O'Donnell, Circus World Museum Director. "Around 1888, they began to travel by train expanding their travels."

According to O'Donnell, the first circus to be held in a tent was the Ringling Bros Circus who pitched that first tent in 1894 in Baraboo at the site that is now the Baraboo Post Office.

Over the years, the circus – especially the Ringling Brothers Circus – grew and redefined itself adding a variety of acts, including aerialists, acrobats, clowns, and animals, giraffes, horses, elephants and lions.

While the circus grew and expanded it also suffered some challenging times including the depression, wars and changing views about the use of animals in entertainment. In 2017, the Greatest Show on Earth announced that it would close.

The memory of the circus has not been lost thanks to John M. Kelley, personal attorney to the Ringling Brothers who retired to Baraboo and began to advocate for a circus museum there at the site of the Ringling's original



above: Scott O'Donnell is the current Director of the Circus Museum. He has worked in circuses for many years including being a clown. **at left:** Riding a unicycle requires skill and balance especially when riding up and down steps.

SANDRA LANDEN MACHAJ *Our Town*

property. He was joined by the Gellar family – first cousins to the Ringling family.

The museum, known as Circus World Museum, opened in 1959 with less than an acre of land, six circus wagons and two buildings. Today it covers 64 acres, includes 30 structures, seven National Landmarks and 265 circus wagons that were retrieved from around the country and is now run by the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Still a great show

A visit to Circus World is a trip to the past. Entering the grounds there is a large building that shares the history of the circus, throughout the country and especially its Wisconsin heritage.

Walking out into the midway is like being right back at the circus. Each day there are two shows held in a tent. Guests can sit there and enjoy popcorn or cotton candy while a variety of circus acts begins. From acrobats doing high wire acts, jugglers keeping objects in motion – sometimes while balancing on a bicycle on the ground or in the air – to the clown, who has perfected trying to interfere with the other acts and making the audience laugh.

Animals add to the mystique of the show including trained horses prancing around the ring, sometimes with a goat on its back or while a pony meanders underneath the horses as they walk through.

Finally, the elephants make an appearance. Circus World Museum has two elephants, Kelly and Viola, who weigh 10,000 and 7,500 pounds, respectively. They were seen in the show twice daily and for their final

performances last season. After the Aug. 27, 2023, shows, the two were retired to The Endangered Ark in Hugo, Oklahoma to live out their days comfortably, according to O'Donnell.

One of the interesting shows is the watermelon feed, where the elephants are given whole watermelons to smash open and enjoy. This year's watermelon feeds will be held on Aug. 19 and 20.

After the shows, elephant and pony rides are available for children to enjoy.

When finished with the show, guests are encouraged to meander over to the Dinky Dew Music Review tent where a show of unique music is presented. The musicians play on unusual instruments, composed of different piping and tubes, which allows them to produce unique sounds. Afterwards, a step outside allows visitors to view another thrill act as a motorcycle is driven on a high wire while the driver's daughter dangles below.

For carousel lovers, the 1917 Herschell Spillman carousel with its original wooden horses is a special treat. Near the carousel there is an outdoor play area for kids to enjoy.

Some of the most treasured highlights of the museum are the pavilion holding the beautiful and extravagant circus wagons that Charles Phillip Fox, an early director of the museum, is credited with securing.

Circus World Museum is at 550 Water St., Baraboo, and is open daily 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. during its open season. Entry fees are: \$23, adults; \$20, seniors 65 and older; \$15, children 5 to 12 years old; free for children younger than 5.

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A message for all to hear

Screenwriter believes story of dad's childhood can inspire change



By **Maureen Vander Sanden**
CONTRIBUTOR

Late last summer, when the otherwise near-empty Wisconsin School for the Deaf is full of commotion, a fight breaks out in the cafeteria.

As a crowd of middle schoolers cheer loudly, one student has another pinned down on the ground and is on the verge of throwing a punch.

But the Delavan-based, specialty state school is not in session, and these are not students.

They're young actors set in the 1970s working on an important project – one that supporters hope will “be a force of change.”

“In the Jungle” is a short film from an award-winning screenplay written by Muskego native Chelsea Kania, 38.

The script centers on Eric, a middle school boy who is an outcast among his peers. He has two hearing aids, a giant pair of glasses, and finds solace in his drawings.

On the school day depicted in the film, the class lesson is “Survival of the Fittest,” and Eric is faced with the school bully. He will soon have to decide whether he’s a lion, a gazelle, or king of the jungle.

Eric’s character – and the deeply-woven symbolism of the jungle throughout – is inspired by the screenwriter’s dad, Rick Kania, and her late uncle Allan.

Both were born with profound hearing loss and experienced additional hearing loss throughout their lives. The brothers grew up attending traditional schools with

little to no support and were often bullied, according to Chelsea.

Rick said he was routinely called “retarded” and “deaf and dumb” – words he is relieved are not used today. But even being referred to as “disabled” makes the 65-year-old regional planner cringe.

“I prefer to define (hearing loss) more as ‘a challenge’,” he said in a recent phone interview.

Like Eric, Rick has proven himself a champion.

People in the deaf community want to be treated with respect and dignity, he explained.

Rick lets his intelligence and other characteristics define him, rather than his hearing loss, just as his brother Allan did.

Allan had a more severe hearing impairment and suffered from constant tinnitus which caused sleep deprivation, Rick said. Still, Allan was highly intelligent and worked tirelessly to help improve the quality of life for all, including children with disabilities and impairments.

An important story

For Chelsea, who is now based in London, writing “In the Jungle” began simply as an exercise in empathy.

“...it was a bit like family therapy... just trying to imagine the childhoods they had without any expectations of (the screenplay) becoming a film,” she wrote in an email.

The film’s director, Ky Dickens, was the driving force behind bringing her screenplay to life, Chelsea said.

Dickens, according to Chelsea, is a brilliant, award-winning director whose films are focused on shifting public policy and culture.

“She immediately understood ‘In the Jungle’ was an important deaf story and that it had a widely relatable message about being an outsider and finding your inner power even when the whole world feels like it’s working against you,” Chelsea explained.

“It was important to me that the experience of my dad and uncle transcended to this level,” she added. “And I believed in Ky’s vision for the film.”

For Rick, his hearing loss seemed to only make him more determined to succeed. School was a challenge for him with no interpreter and a hearing aid that certainly didn’t work miracles.

In grade school, it often caused sores inside his right ear canal, delivered high-pitched tinnitus, and bullies would pull on its cords. Rick relied on books and lip reading for his class instruction, and with the teacher often facing the blackboard, he said there was much he missed out on.

He recalled crying a lot in first grade at Milwaukee’s Tippecanoe Grade School, especially when he was first learning how to read, write and solve math problems.

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

Chelsea Kania was inspired by her dad Rick (left) and uncle, both of whom were born and grew up with profound hearing loss, which presented many challenges including them being bullied.

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“No one could figure out why I was crying all the time. I realized later it was because I could not hear well, even though I had a hearing aid. I was at the seat of my pants trying to figure out what I was supposed to do,” Rick explained.

He has since upgraded hearing devices twice. In high school, during a loud pep rally, he lost his hearing in his right ear completely and was fitted with a behind-the-ear hearing aid for his left ear that was gentler on his canal and a lot less cumbersome with no need for cords. Still, his brain needed to adapt to the new device, and his body had to relearn proper balance with hearing on a different side. The adjustment did not come without challenges, according to Rick.

Now completely deaf, today he hears better than ever after having a cochlear implant in 2005.

It took some serious adjusting, but with the cochlear, Rick joyfully laughed when he recalled the day it worked.

“Oh my god, I could hear the birds whistling. I could hear humming on an electrical line. I could hear my zipper zip. I could hear the clock ticking,” he said. “I had to ask my wife repeatedly, ‘What are those sounds I never heard before.’”

The implant was a success. Malcolm Engel, who plays Eric in the film, also wears cochlear implants.

Rick was on set the day of filming when there was a confrontation between Eric and his bully. He said he could relate to Engel’s character in several ways.

Chelsea said she knows it made her father emotional.

“It must’ve been completely surreal,” she said of her dad watching the scene unfold.

“I think it’s incredibly brave of him to reopen his difficult past, because storytelling can have an amazingly healing ripple effect,” Chelsea said.

“If we see someone is brave enough to tell their story, we’re inspired to tell our own stories. So, I am very proud of him,” she added.

In an email, Chelsea said that through the process of filming and marketing her script, she often was told “All deaf stories deserve telling,” but she would like to expand that to: All outsider stories deserve telling.

“‘In the Jungle’ promotes the idea that the more we can share our unique experiences, the more we can find connection through them and discover that we are more alike than we think. I think our world can use a strong dose of this kind of

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 21

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empathy right now,” Chelsea said.

‘Short ... (but) complex’

“In the Jungle” is two years in the making since Chelsea first teamed up with her director.

Now in the final stages of production, producers hope to have the film completed sometime in February.

Sound work and animation are the current focus.

Disney animator David Stodolny is executing the animation using his young daughter’s original artwork to bring Eric’s drawings to life.

Sound design will be completed by a top-notch team.

The film’s dynamic sound will shift between Eric’s perspective with hearing aids to the imagined jungle world of his drawings, according to Chelsea.

“So, for a short film, it’s pretty complex,” the screenwriter stated.

Knowing it could cost \$150,000 or more to make the film a reality, Chelsea said “In the Jungle” has proven to be a passion project.

One of her main goals is to make the film freely available to institutions for educational and community purposes.

“I want it to be seen by as many people as possible,” she said.

At each phase of the production, Chelsea said she has worried about how they would raise funds to get to the next phase.

“But that’s the thing about passion projects – you just take them one bit at a time and thank your lucky stars for the amazing people who help it along.”

She credited Julie Holma, a Waterford based deaf and educational interpreter, for leading the post-production campaign, which is still in the works.

As a lifelong hearing advocate and mother to a hard of hearing child, Holma said she was instantly drawn to Chelsea’s script and the film’s potential to bring awareness to the mental health crisis of deaf children and adults.

“Mental health statistics for deaf adults (due to bullying, isolation and language deprivation as children) are tragic,” Holma said. “For me, the film will bring national and international awareness to the struggles of our deaf children, and we hope to use this film to improve mental health outcomes of our deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind children.”

Support from the deaf community and beyond

HEAR Wisconsin came in as the fiscal sponsor for production in 2022, according to Chelsea.

The non-profit organization provides services and resources to children, adults and seniors who are deaf and hard of hearing.



Award-winning screenwriter Chelsea Kania said writing “In the Jungle” began as an empathy exercise – trying to imagine what it would be like to grow up with hearing loss. It’s based on the experiences of her dad, Rick (left) and uncle Allan, who inspired her.

SUBMITTED PHOTO *Our Town*

For more Information

To follow the film’s progress or to secure it as a free, educational resource visit www.inthejunglefilm.com, or follow Chelsea Kania on Instagram @chelseamonrania for milestone updates.

Anyone feeling inspired to contribute and be named a producer of “In the Jungle” can email Kania at chelseakania@gmail.com.

HEAR Wisconsin’s support is special, the screenwriter said, as its services were the few provided to her dad and uncle back in the 1950s.

The Tichigan Lake Lions Club most recently joined the film’s roster of supporters, which, in addition to HEAR Wisconsin includes the Wisconsin School for the Deaf, various other Lions clubs, and private citizens.

During the civic club’s annual Christmas party held in December of 2023, Tichigan Lions committed \$12,000 toward the film’s post-production costs.

One member, Lion John Palmer, said he felt moved to give additional funds, stating that the film is close to his heart as

someone with a deaf brother.

Those types of connections have resonated throughout the filming, which Chelsea said is touching. She’s also “honored and humbled” by the Lions’ support.

She cited the emblem of Lions International, which states: “Facing the past with pride and the future with confidence, looking in all directions to render service.”

“I can’t help but think how perfectly our missions align,” Chelsea said.

“The generosity and kindness of Wisconsinites is well known all over the world, but it warms my heart to see it in action.”



Screenwriter Chelsea Kania and director Ky Dickens work behind the scenes at Wisconsin School for the Deaf during filming for ‘In the Jungle’ last summer.

COURTESY MICHAEL OGNISANTI, ITJ DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY *Our Town*

Dueling PIANOS



Lawn Lawn Resort in Delavan played host to the New Dueling Pianos in December of 2023. The request-driven show features a pair of pianists who work comedy and improvisation into their performance.

DAVE DRESDOW *Our Town*

A sweet rescue in store for Delavan woman

Muddy Paws Cheesecake in Twin Cities gets possible CNBC save

By **Jennifer Eisenbart**
EDITOR

A Delavan native has recently been mentioned on the national news scene. The end result could be the rescue of her 30-year cheesecake business.

In December, just before the Christmas holiday, Muddy Paws Cheesecake creator and owner Tami Cabrera was preparing for the end in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

“We hadn’t put out an announcement or a press release,” Cabrera said about the closing of the long-time cheesecake store. “We wanted people to find out through our website, because we have such a close relationship with our customers.”

“I couldn’t really see it changing,” she added.

But the bad luck of the last five years – including a destructive burglary that resulted in a move to a new location (and extensive renovation costs), failed philanthropic endeavors and the COVID-19 pandemic – ended Dec. 27, thanks to CNBC’s Marcus Lemonis.

The host of CNBC’s “The Profit” –

a reality show about struggling small businesses – reached out to Cabrera through X (formerly Twitter) with an offer.

Cabrera needed to make \$40,000 worth of cheesecakes for him, which would be given away after charging him the full retail price. He would then work with her on a business plan – which included getting the community of the Twin Cities involved.

Lemonis took to X/Twitter with specific questions and ideas after friends of Cabrera and the store took to the platform to recruit help.

“I didn’t even know it was going on,” Cabrera said. “By the time I got on Twitter, it had reached thousands of people.”

Now, two weeks later, things are looking up for the formerly doomed business.

With Lemonis’ guidance, the cheesecake store has redesigned its website – and worked to provide a more reasonable inventory, going from 222 flavors down to the most popular seven.

On the website, muddypawsheesecake.com,

people can still place orders for the following cheesecakes – raspberry swirl, New York, key lime, Oreo, Chocolate Decadence, turtle and caramel swirl.

The store was officially scheduled to reopen Wednesday, and the website said preorders would be taken, but not fulfilled until that day.

In the meantime, Cabrera is still trying to raise money to save the business. While Lemonis’ donation – and revised business plan – has helped, she’s still looking to raise more money.

“I’m very hopeful,” she said. “I’m willing to make the changes I need to keep the bakery open.”

Cabrera admitted she expected the business would “just fade away” at the end of 2023, but the public hasn’t allowed that to happen.

“I’ll never forget this week in my life as long as I live,” she said.

For the full blog about Cabrera’s business and the attempts to save it, go to www.muddypawsheesecake.com and click on “Blogs.”

A story of desperation - and hope

Join the Movement fundraiser hits in the heart on a cold evening

By **Jennifer Eisenbart**
EDITOR

Growing up in Illinois, Sherry Camp knew nothing of a regular home life.

With two parents that abused her amidst alcohol and drug abuse, Camp's father promised her as a bride to the Klu Klux Klan. Her mother never said the words, "I love you," and both parents fought constantly.

That horrendous start led Camp to a life of sexual exploitation, first as a youngster, then as a teenager and finally as an adult. It took her until the last decade, but she is finally free of the dark that her life began in and is now an ordained minister.

"I am the bride of Jesus Christ, not the KKK or Satan," Camp said, speaking to those gathered at the Join the Movement Gala at The Riviera in downtown Lake Geneva in January. "My name is Sherry, and I will continue to share my story for the rest of my life."

Camp's emotional, 30-minute speech – she set a timer for herself so she would have the motivation to stop – capped an evening of both fundraising and enjoyment with the serious message of what the organization hopes to stop, human trafficking.

In spite of the winter storm that had moved through a day earlier – it continued to snow throughout the event as temperatures dropped – all but five of the ticket holders for gala showed up.

JTM President and Founder Dawn Fiedler said after the event she was thrilled with the turnout. Additionally, while a mystery theater event was held during dinner, it wrapped up in time for the focus to be on Camp.

"I had so many people just tell me, 'she could've kept on talking,'" Fiedler said "I was so glad she was the focus of the evening.

"If we left every event with just sharing the darkness and not sharing that hope ... we have to be that light," Fiedler added. "As community members that care. That's how we can make a difference every day."

The mystery theater event was done with The Murder Mystery Co. out of Chicago, with the group doing a diamond heist instead of a murder.

There were also silent auctions, plus the "Diamond Ice Queen" – Fiedler's mother walking around with mystery gift



Author and human trafficking survivor Sherry Camp shows off the two books she has written – "Pathways to Healing" and "Hooker to Holy Victim to Victor: The Great Escape" at the gala. Camp was the featured guest speaker at the event.

JENNIFER EISENBART *Our Town*

card envelopes that could be purchased for \$20 each (with a minimum \$20 gift card inside).

That wasn't the only news of the evening. As things were winding down, Fiedler said a shelter for survivors was in the works.

Finding a way forward, in spite of a loss of faith

Camp seemed to hit almost every emotion possible during her speech. She took the time to share details of her childhood, which included abuse by both parents and eventually her stepmother and stepbrother.

"My early life was full of violence," she explained. Her brothers had to stop her mother from beating her once, and those same siblings stood up against her father.

Camp explained that she turned to alcohol and drugs to numb herself against the constant pain, not understanding that what she was experiencing wasn't normal family life. Her grandmother paid for her to attend a private Christian school through ninth grade, though, and Camp said, "I loved Jesus with all my heart."

The details in Camp's story were intense – and heartbreaking. She danced to earn money, admitted she let any man who showed affection have access to her, and lost one of her children to AIDS when he was 9 months old.

At that point, she admitted, she no longer trusted God.

"I prayed to God and asked him to let me die," she said, admitting she did everything possible to not live.

After her grandmother died, Camp eventually decided to move to Oregon in an attempt to outrun her problems.

"And guess who I took with me?" she asked. "Me."

Problems continued. She found herself on the bottom rung of a ladder of a woman who pimped her out as a prostitute, and continued to find herself in abusive relationships.

"For taking back my power, my life was sure out of control," Camp explained.

She realized she wasn't changing and moved back to Rockford. The year 2010 was the last day she worked in the sex trade, though it wasn't the end of her troubles.

Camp said she realized that she could trust God to love her and help her fix things.

"I could do a lot of things, but I couldn't stay sober on my own," she said. "I wanted to get better or die."

Faced with a choice, Camp chose to renew her faith in God. She is now an ordained minister, and feels she's learned some important truths. She said the biggest problem with her thinking was the warped idea that she was never good enough or clean enough.

"God knows I'm not perfect, and he loves me anyway," she said, receiving a standing ovation from the audience. "I'm embracing God's purpose for me fully, and I'm not letting go."

"God wins. Love wins," she added, saying that her three other children have thrived against all odds. "I love the woman I am today."

Exciting news

As the evening wound to a close, Fiedler got up to thank the crowd for attending – and got reminded she had news to share.

The new shelter will hopefully open within a year, and Fiedler further explained the need for it. Those in the sex trade with felony convictions are not eligible for state or federal aid, she said, and both men and women are in need of support whether it's after jail or leaving abuse.

"If they are not given an aftercare program, they will be revictimized," Fiedler said.

Fiedler said the shelter will serve as a registered safe house, which means the location will not be publicly known but available to those in need. She hopes that other organizations will step up to help with it, as it will take "many hands" to make it work.

JTM continues its fundraising efforts throughout the year. In June, the organization is planning a Garden Party event at the Rosewood Dinner Theatre. Doors will open at 11:30 a.m. for the event.

For more information, go to www.jtme.org/jtm-garden-party-fundraiser.

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