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2025



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OUR MISSION

The Edgar County Community Foundation seeks to raise the quality of life throughout Edgar County by developing and channeling philanthropy to meet the changing needs of its residents. Through collaboration and cooperation with community groups and individuals the foundation provides opportunity to both the donor and the recipient.

The foundation supports nonprofit organizations working in the arts and culture, civic affairs, historic preservation, education, youth activities, environmental affairs and health and human services. For more information, contact us by phone, mail, or email.

FOREVER FUND

ECCF's "Forever Fund" is a permanent endowment and offers donors the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the Edgar County community, knowing that their charitable donations will remain intact, "forever". The assets of the Forever Fund are conservatively invested to allow for grants benefiting the local community, to be awarded annually, based upon a percentage of the total of the Fund's assets. The larger the fund, the greater the annual grants that can be made for the benefit of our community. This fund has been very popular for local donors. Since its inception in 2018, the fund has grown to over a half a million dollars. Your tax deductible donations to the Forever Fund will be available to help your grandchildren and endless future generations of local residents and children, for years to come.

ECCF FACTS

The Edgar County Community Foundation came from a simple idea. It provides a conduit for our residents, families, and everyone with ties to Edgar County to support local charities,civic causes, health, educational scholarships, and school development. They are assured the money will be used in support of those groups, exclusively in Edgar County. It started in 1996 with a goal of improving life for the people of Edgar County. **ECCF** is a **WORKING** Foundation, raising and dispersing over 6 million dollars since inception. Our Foundation has working funds of over $2 million dollars this year. With the addition of our new permanent **Forever Fund**, everyone can rest assured donations will continue indefinitely used **For Good, Forever, For Edgar County.**

Through your continued support of the Edgar County Community Foundation and its Forever Fund, opportunities for continued growth in our county are available through grants and community engagement.

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WHAT'S INSIDE?

This year, The Prairie Press is proud to celebrate the 'Trailblazers of Tomorrow.' The innovators, pioneers and change-makers actively working to create a difference in Edgar County. From farms to hospitals, theatres to funeral homes and everything in between, we believe that Edgar County is full of powerful voices who are blazing a trail forward. In these pages, we hope our readers will find stories of strength, heart and a reminder that the steps we take today secure the future for ourselves and our community.

-BETHANY WAGONER, PUBLISHER

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OUR HOME MAGAZINE

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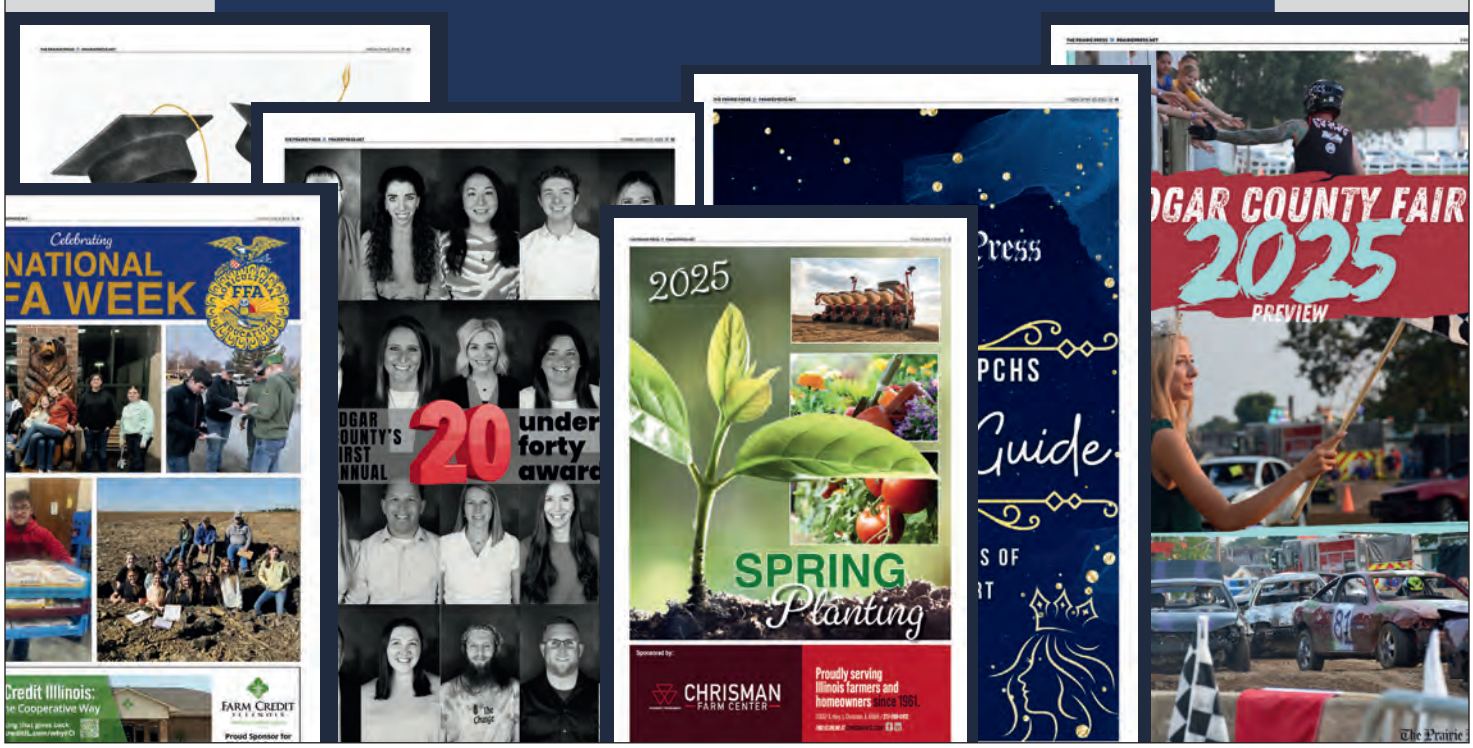
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By Bethany Wagoner

In the heart of Paris, Horizon Health is redefining rural healthcare—shattering expectations with a bold, compassionate and innovative approach to surgical care. Far from the traditional perception of a small-town hospital, Horizon Health's surgery department is proving that cutting-edge medicine isn't just the domain of major cities—it's thriving right here in Edgar County.

"People are completely blown away when they learn about the advanced surgeries we offer here," Kimberly Sweitzer, Director of Surgical Services, said. "They assume they'll need to travel to Chicago or Indianapolis for specialized treatment, but we're doing procedures here that most hospitals can't."

With specialties that include bariatrics, orthopedics, podiatry, spine and urology, Horizon Health's surgical center has become a beacon for both innovation and personalized patient care. The hospital's advanced offerings range from laparoscopic surgeries and mastectomies to minimally invasive spine procedures and stereotactic breast biopsies—all performed by a passionate team of board-certified and award-winning surgeons and specialists.

"We might be a small-town hospital," Surgery Manager Heather Crippes said."But we're definitely not a small-town approach to healthcare."

That small-town-big-offering mindset is reflected in the department's outstanding outcomes. With a current 100 percent patient satisfaction score, the surgical team has successfully blended high-tech solutions with the kind of personalized care that only a tight-knit community can offer.

"Our surgeons all have excellent bedside manner, the patients rave about them," Sweitzer said.

Reviews promote "a very caring human feel to the experience," doctors who "explain things so well and are very understanding" and a "highly professional staff that are very thorough, friendly and make me feel comfortable."

A large part of the department's success with patients is advancements in intraoperative treatments, according to Crippes.

"Our patients, they get up sooner and they leave sooner; they require little or no narcotics," she said.





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Photos provided by Horizon Health

"They are not taking all of that medicine, and that's the technology we are keeping up with. The procedures and benefits we can provide patients really do help and benefit them."

Anesthesia advancements, nerve blocking techniques and several laparoscopic procedures make the list of innovations that benefit patients.

Another point of success for the surgical team is a culture that embraces innovation without bureaucracy, a culture the team of surgeons and support staff members have worked hard to build together.

"Around here, we really are a family and we celebrate all of the occasions and accomplishments together," Crippes said. "We are truly blessed with the team that we have, and we are lucky to have a very, very low turnover rate."

Sweitzer noted that many of the hospital's top surgeons came from larger hospitals where their ideas were stifled.

"They were frustrated because they had innovative new techniques but couldn't get approval to use them," she said. "Other hospitals didn't want to invest in the equipment. Here, we say, 'You betcha—let's do it.'"

That willingness to invest in both people and technology has paid off, making Horizon Health a designated Center of Excellence in multiple specialties, including both Bariatrics and Axonics Therapy.

"Horizon Health is known for its fantastic culture, but we are also performing complex specialized procedures utilizing minimally invasive and advanced technologies," Sweitzer said. "These are life-changing procedures for patients suffering with chronic conditions."

UROLOGY: PRECISION AND PROGRESS

Horizon's urology team employs groundbreaking techniques like Holmium laser enucleation of the prostate—a minimally invasive option that improves recovery time. They also offer complete care for conditions like benign prostatic hyperplasia, pelvic reconstruction and bladder and bowel stimulation therapies.

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Aconics Therapy, also called Sacral Neuromodulation, is a treatment for overactive bladder and bowel. The hospital has received multiple awards for the minimally invasive procedure.

BARIATRIC SURGERY: A YEARLONG COMMITMENT

The Center of Excellence in Bariatrics offers a full suite of weight-loss procedures, including sleeve gastrectomy, duodenal switch and gastric bypass. But surgery is just the beginning—the program includes a year of follow-up care, dietary support and mental health counseling.

Surgeons also perform TIFF procedures for GERD and Bravo testing for diagnosis. They are also nationally recognized by the American Academy of Surgeons.

PODIATRY: SAVING SOLES, SAVING LIMBS

Horizon's podiatry team treats a wide range of conditions, from bunions to diabetic foot ulcers. One standout physician has gained national recognition for her use of fish-skin grafts to heal diabetic wounds—earning awards two years in a row and even traveling to Iceland to be honored.

SPINE AND ORTHOPEDICS: TOTAL CARE, TOP TECH

From total joint replacements and arthroscopic shoulder surgeries to emergency spine stabilization, Horizon offers full-spectrum orthopedic and spine care.

"We do it all—cervical, lumbar, fractures, instrumentation," Sweitzer said.

Procedures include anterior hip replacements, advanced knee reconstructions, osteoporosis care and sports medicine for all ages.

BREAST SURGERY: COMPREHENSIVE AND COMPASSIONATE

Horizon's team performs stereotactic procedures, lumpectomies and sentinel lymph node biopsies.



They also offer complete diagnostic services, including digital mammography, breast ultrasound and biopsy services, helping patients detect and treat breast issues early.

GENERAL SURGERY: MINIMALLY INVASIVE, MAXIMALLY EFFECTIVE

The hospital's general surgeons prioritize opioid-free, minimally invasive techniques, often allowing patients to go home the same day. They address everything from hernias and gallbladder disease to colon surgery and advanced endoscopy, including ICG fluoroscopy and bile duct exploration.

Additionally, the department offers multiple advanced, surgical pain procedures including kyphoplasty, used to treat vertebral compression fractures typically caused by osteoporosis or spinal tumors, surgically implanted spinal cord stimulators, MILD (minimally invasive lumbar decompressions) and implantable pain pumps.

Innovation in the surgery department at Horizon Health isn't just about procedures—it's about people. The team addresses social determinants of health, such as transportation and access to home care, to ensure patients are supported before and after surgery.

"We look at everything," Crippes said. "It's not just about what happens in the OR. It's about the whole patient."

With plans for continued expansion and an unwavering commitment to community wellness, Horizon Health is proving that rural hospitals can be leaders in world-class care.

"Nothing is ever off the table for us," Crippes said. "We might have hometown roots, but we're providing world-class medical care."

For residents of Edgar County and beyond, the message is clear: the future of surgery isn't just arriving—it's already here. The department is currently expanding its search for an ENT specialist, offering continuing education programs for its staff members and opening its doors to a variety of students.

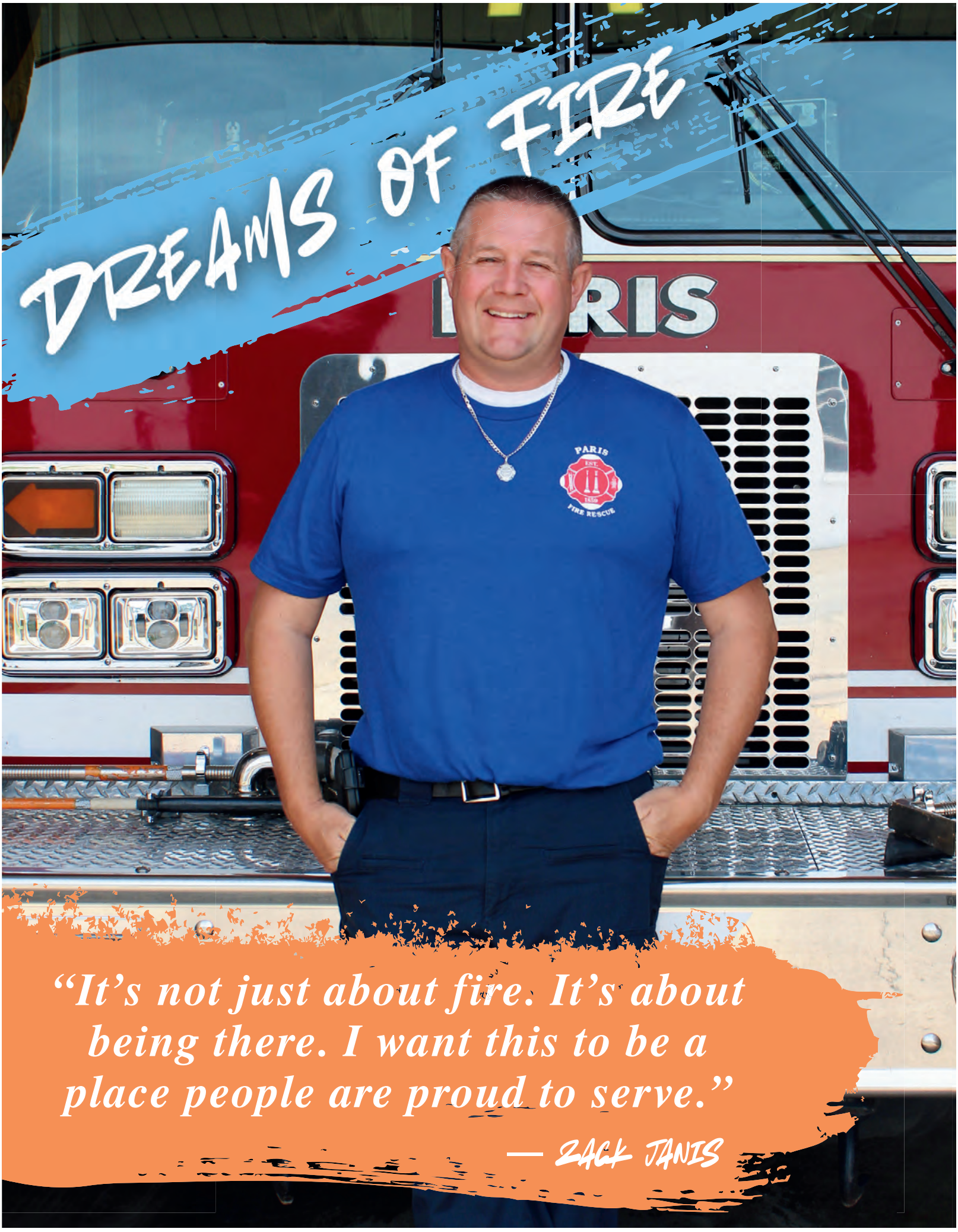
Plans are also in the works to add an additional operating room to the department, complete with the latest technology and state-of-the-art equipment.

"We have been traveling to New York and a few other places to see other operating rooms and learning all about the technology that is available. We hope a new operating room and an expansion are in our future; it is something we definitely need," Sweitzer said. "We have an incredible team and surgeons who are truly dedicated to finding the latest, innovative ideas and pushing them forward … what it all comes down to at the end of the day is giving every patient that walks in our doors the best experience we can and that is what we are committed to doing."



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DREAMS OF FIRE



"It's not just about fire. It's about being there. I want this to be a place people are proud to serve."

— ZACK JANIS

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By Victoria Leitch

A firehouse is more than just a building with red trucks and blaring sirens. It's a symbol of safety, sacrifice and family legacy. For Zack Janis, the soon-to-be Fire Chief of Paris, it's all of that and more.

Janis' story starts not with a dramatic fire call, but with childhood awe, admiration and the steady influence of a man in turnout gear: his father.

"I remember being five years old, watching these house burns that the department used to do for training," Janis said. "It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen."

His father, the longtime chief in Effingham and owner of Lake Sara Marina, helped lay the foundation for a career Janis knew he wanted from an early age.

"My dad is my inspiration. He was my first hero," he said.

With firefighting running deep in the family—both of his brothers were firemen too—Janis never doubted his calling. He graduated from Effingham High School in 2001, attended EMT school and then went on to the Fire Academy in Champaign.

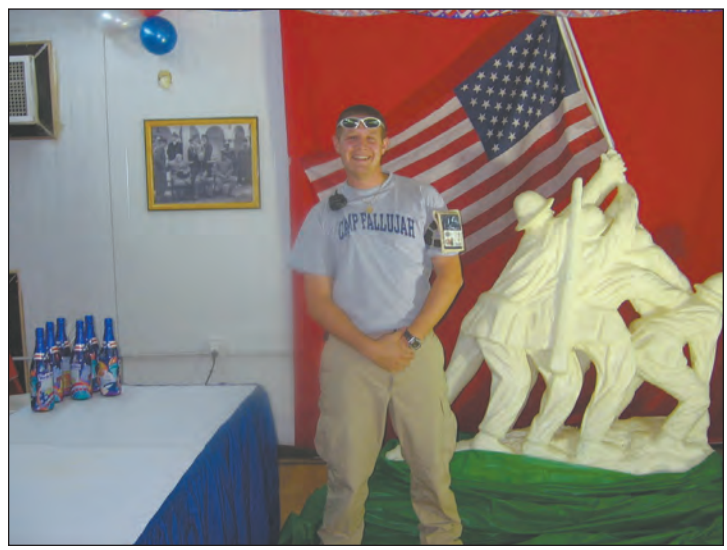
Back then, landing a full-time firefighting job was no easy feat. During firehouse testings, 600 to 700 applicants would test for a singular position. The struggle for a career path led Janis far beyond Illinois and to Iraq, where he served as a contract combat firefighter.

"I started all of this right after 9/11. It just made sense to serve," he said. "(Combat firefighting) was totally different. We didn't have hydrants. We had to manage with whatever water was available. You're in a bunker, in a compound the size of a small city, never knowing what could happen."

The experience also gave him more than just valuable professional experience.

"What I gained there was confidence. I was 23, fresh out from under my mom's wing, and it taught me how to think under pressure," Janis said.

Janis returned to the States in 2006, where he secured a position with the Paris Fire Department.



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From there, he steadily rose through the ranks, becoming captain in 2015. This July, he began a new chapter as interim chief, preparing to officially take over the role at the end of August.

But for Janis, firefighting has never been just a job. It's a deeply personal mission.

"You don't do this for the money," he said. "You do it because it's in your blood. It's who you are."

That personal connection is woven into his most memorable moments on the job. One that stands out happened early in Janis' Paris career, when he responded to a call involving a 10-month-old girl reportedly choking.

"She was crying, so I thought she was fine. Then she stopped breathing in my arms," Janis recalled.

"I flipped her over, hit her back, and she started crying again. But it kept happening. Eventually, I did a finger sweep and pulled out this huge hair barrette."

Years later, at a bike rodeo, a girl approached him with her mother and said, "You saved me." He took a picture with her, a moment he describes as "the most rewarding thing I've ever experienced."

Now, as he prepares to lead the department, Janis is passionate about making the department more visible, accessible and proactive. That means pushing for more community involvement, better public education and thoughtful touches like stuffed animals for children at traumatic scenes.

"I want to modernize our outreach, such as social media, videos and training content. People need to see us not just as the guys who show up in emergencies, but as part of the community," he said. "It's little things that leave a big impact. On someone's worst day, we're the ones who show up. That matters."

Janis hopes his compassionate leadership style will attract new recruits in an era when fewer people consider public service.



Janis poses with the young girl he saved when she was an infant. He considers it one of the most memorable moments of his career.

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"It's not just about fire. It's about being there. I want this to be a place people are proud to serve," he said.

Despite his confidence and credentials, Janis admits that stepping into the chief's role is daunting.

"It scares the hell out of me," he said with a smile. "Not because I can't do the job, but because I want to do it right. I want our department to be seen as top-tier. Professional. Caring. Committed."

Janis isn't just inheriting a title. He's taking on a legacy. One started by his father, carried on with his brothers and now redefined by his own journey from the dusty compounds of Iraq to the streets of Paris.

But even the strongest journeys take unexpected turns.

In January 2020, during a fire on Douglas Street, Janis' life changed in an instant. As a firefighter, he rushed into a burning home, only to have the floor collapse beneath him. He was trapped, unable to breathe, holding onto life—literally—by the grip of fellow firefighter Mark Brinkerhoff.

"The last thing I remember is thinking, 'I'm about to die,'" he said.

Janis blacked out and fell through the floor. His brothers at the station pulled him out and onto the front lawn. The physical injuries kept him away from work for months, but the emotional impact lingered even longer.

It was during those months of recovery that Janis made a decision that would shape the next chapter of his life: he earned his real estate license. In the beginning, it was just a practical move; buying and selling properties for his family's rental business to save money on commissions. But, like firefighting, real estate soon became something deeper: a way to serve people.

"I can't sit still," he laughed. "I needed something that gave me purpose."

In the past year alone, Janis sold 125 homes—more than triple the volume of any other agent in his area. But his success isn't just about numbers. It's about people. Whether it's a $20,000 fixer-upper or a $500,000 dream home, Janis treats every client with the same level of care and attention.

"People talk. If you treat someone like a number, they'll remember that. But if you treat them like they matter, they'll never forget it," he said.

That mindset has set him apart. From social media videos to personal walkthroughs, Janis stays in constant communication with clients, educating them through every step of the process.

"I don't just want people to buy a house. I want them to truly understand what they're doing," he said. "That way, they're not just ready for this house, but the next one too."

The same spirit extends to his other ventures. Janis co-owns the town's only laundromat with his brother-in-law, and they've worked with HRC to organize free laundry days to help families in need. He helps coach local baseball teams, rents homes to essential workers and never shies away from lending a hand to someone struggling.

As a firefighter captain, a real estate powerhouse, a small business owner and a mentor in the community, Janis wears a lot of hats. He jokes that he works "part-time, full-time," bouncing from house showings to fire calls and back again. But he wouldn't have it any other way.

"(My dad) taught me what it meant to show up," Janis said. "To care. To stay late and be the one people can count on."

Zack Janis hopes that his legacy lives on. Not in how many houses he sells or how many houses he hoses down—but in how he makes people feel.

"I want people to say, 'He was kind. He listened. He helped.' That's the mark I want to leave."





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"It's not just about the past. It's about present and future athletes."

— HARRY HUGHES

HONORING THE TIGER LEGACY

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By Nancy Zeman

"An idea whose time had finally come."

That's how members of the Paris High School Athletic Hall of Fame committee described their work to establish a PHS Athletic Hall of Fame to honor the long history of the school's athletic teams, individuals and coaches.

According to Harry Hughes, chairman of the HOF committee, a group of residents began meeting in February 2021 to explore the possibility of establishing a hall of fame for the school. "It wasn't something we could just jump into and begin inducting people," Hughes explained. "There are a lot of moving pieces, and we felt we had to get it right."

While many fans have discussed the establishment of a Paris High School Hall of Fame for many years, the idea has met with resistance from some older fans and former coaches, who feel that athletics require a team approach for the most part. Singling out individual athletes would be wrong, those fans argued.

However, in 2014, a group of fans formed a committee to organize a final game at Eveland Gym, as the new high school was set to open the following school year. The game was set for Friday, Feb. 13, 2014, against Little Illini foe Flora.

The top 25 male and top 13 female players were honored by the Paris Chamber of Commerce and the Prairie Press, and were introduced between games. Former boys and girls basketball coaches were introduced and honored while the Paris High School band, under the direction of Kevin Pruiett and former directors Warren Sperry and Joe Gill, filled the east end of Eveland Gym. Fans began lining up hours before the doors opened for the game, and by halftime of the JV contest, the gym was filled.





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"It was just a great night," Hughes said. "Everyone wanted it to continue."

In February 2021, a group of local fans met at Paris City Hall to begin preliminary discussions on how to establish a Paris High School Athletic Hall of Fame. Among those present was then-Paris 95 board member Tom Tuttle, a diligent committee member and a crucial voice in its establishment.

"Why now?" Tuttle said. "Because it was just time and long overdue."

Tuttle said that recognizing the long history of great athletes and teams is essential not only to the former Tigers themselves but also for the present and future student-athletes.

"At the close of the last century, the Chicago Tribune ran an entire page dedicated to the 20th-century high school basketball programs in the state by decade," Tuttle explained. "Paris was named the dominant team of the decade of the 1940s. The success of those responsible for this needed to be recognized as this helped those (athletes) who were inspired and later became successful."

Hughes agreed.

"Over the many years I followed the Tigers from gym to gym and field to field, I noticed some schools had a hall of fame for their athletes," he said. "We here in Paris have a rich tradition in our sports programs, and I began asking myself, why don't we have one?"

The Paris High School Athletic Hall of Fame was organized as a means of recognizing, preserving and promoting the heritage of interscholastic sports.

"It honors the contributions and accomplishments of individuals who are worthy of recognition as examples for others to emulate," Hughes said. "It's not just about the past. It's about present and future athletes."

High school athletics and activities programs in the United States represent the largest group of amateur athletics and activities participants in the world. These programs provide opportunities to teach values such as sportsmanship, honesty, dedication, teamwork, self-discipline, loyalty and cooperation. The teaching of these values is essential to the education of Paris youth.

"One of the things we talked about a lot as we were organizing was the emphasis on values both in high school and later in life," Hughes said.

Former Lady Tiger basketball standout Danette Pine Young agrees. The purpose, the Crestwood Superintendent of Schools said, is "to preserve the legacy of individuals who have made a lasting impact on our school and community.



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It's a meaningful way to celebrate excellence and inspire future generations and to recognize the achievements and contributions of former PHS athletes, coaches and athletic directors."

Hughes said once the preliminary meetings were underway, "it didn't take long after the idea took shape, we started contacting local sports enthusiasts and former players, and the committee was born."

The committee first had to establish a mission statement and bylaws, Hughes explained. "We were all pretty much on the same page about our mission and who should serve on the committee," he said.

The committee's mission statement is straightforward. "The Hall of Fame award will recognize and honor the outstanding achievements of individual athletes, teams and coaches who have contributed to the success, tradition, integrity, development and promotion of Paris High School athletics." The slogan for the group, which is above the mission statement, is "honoring our past, inspiring our future."

As the committee began its work, Rick Gosnell, a member of the 1971 Elite Eight team who went on to success as a community college and college basketball player, emphasized how many great players in various sports have worn the orange and black.

"Paris has a rich history in sports and those early athletes need to be recognized and remembered along with the great teams and coaches," Gosnell said.

One of the biggest challenges for the group is getting all the great teams and players in the HOF right away.

"It is going to take several years to get all the deserving teams and players in, and that's a bit frustrating," Gosnell said.

The Tigers have been crowned basketball state champions twice (1943 and 1947), finished second once (1942) and placed third in 1939. Additionally, Paris has won four consecutive state cross-country championships (1946, 1947, 1948 and 1949). Gosnell said committee members agreed those teams should have priority.

The most significant number of inductees occurred in the first year. The committee wanted to get some players recognized for the state championship basketball teams. Paris alum, committee member and a member of the Illinois Cross-Country Hall of Fame, Jim Acklin, made recommendations on the order in which the champions should be included.

Besides the state champion teams, the first winner of the individual cross-country championship was Bob Collenberger. Charles Matheny won the cross-country title in 1950 and finished second in 1951. Later that spring, he also won the mile in the state track meet.

Other individuals in the first class include Richard "Dick" Foley, who was a member of both the basketball championship team in 1943, the runner-up in 1942 and was a standout player at the University of Illinois. Robert "Bob" Owens, the captain of the 1947 state championship team, was also included in the first class, as well as Coach Ernie Eveland, who was responsible for the championship basketball and cross-country teams. William "Bill" Bess was also a member of the first class. Bess was one of the best linemen in Tiger football history, going on to play at George Washington University.

Arguably, one of the greatest athletes ever to graduate from Paris High School was Bernie Shively, a multi-sport letterman who went on to become a star multi-sport athlete at Illinois, earning letters in football from 1924-26, wrestling in 1926 and 1927, and track and field from 1925-27. Shively was considered the top blocker for the legendary Red Grange in 1924 and 1925 before earning consensus All-America honors in 1926. He later became the Athletic Director at Kentucky from 1938 until he died in 1967 at the age of 65. Shively is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame, inducted in 1982. His name adorns the Kentucky track and field stadium.

"It's a tough job considering who will be inducted," Young said. "Balancing community input and historical records requires thoughtful decision making."

Otho Tucker, who is now the president of a country school board in Georgia, emphasized that sharing the accomplishments of past Tiger athletes serves as inspiration for present and future athletes. "It gives them something to work towards. They see what's possible," he said.

The HOF allows the Paris community to remember some of the great athletes of the past.

"These teams and individuals put Paris on the map," Tucker said. "There is such a rich history for a small town in east central Illinois."

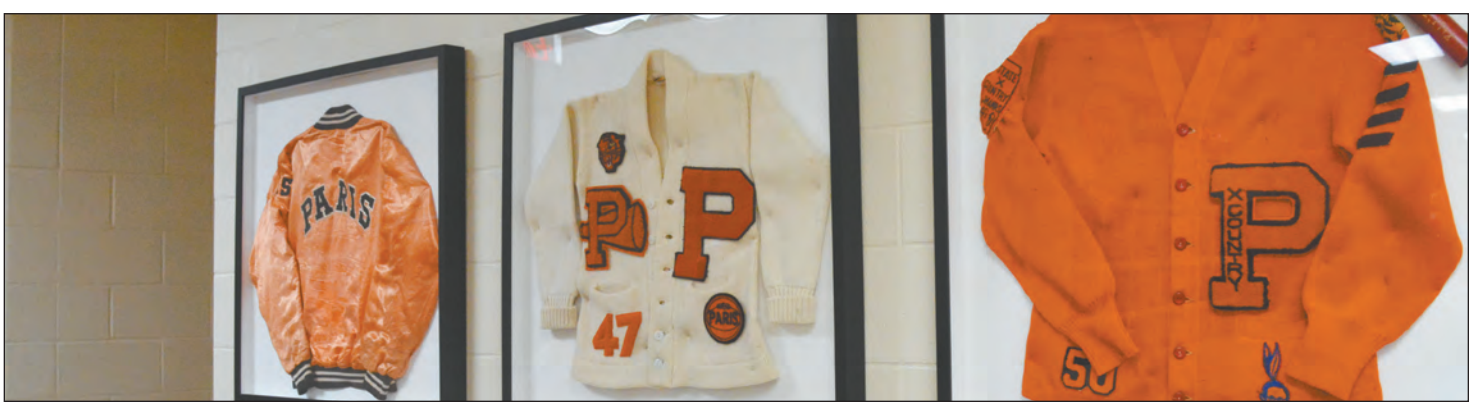
The HOF also highlights how participating in athletics and team sports, along with other extracurricular activities, helps teenagers grow and learn sportsmanship, honesty, dedication, teamwork and self-discipline.

"What I learned from Coach (Bret) Brown was immeasurable. He helped me wade through the recruiting letters from colleges," Tucker said. "When I thought I wanted to change majors at Illinois, I came to Paris and met him at the Parisian Lanes restaurant. We sat there for two hours, hashing it out. Those are the kind of relationships that are priceless."

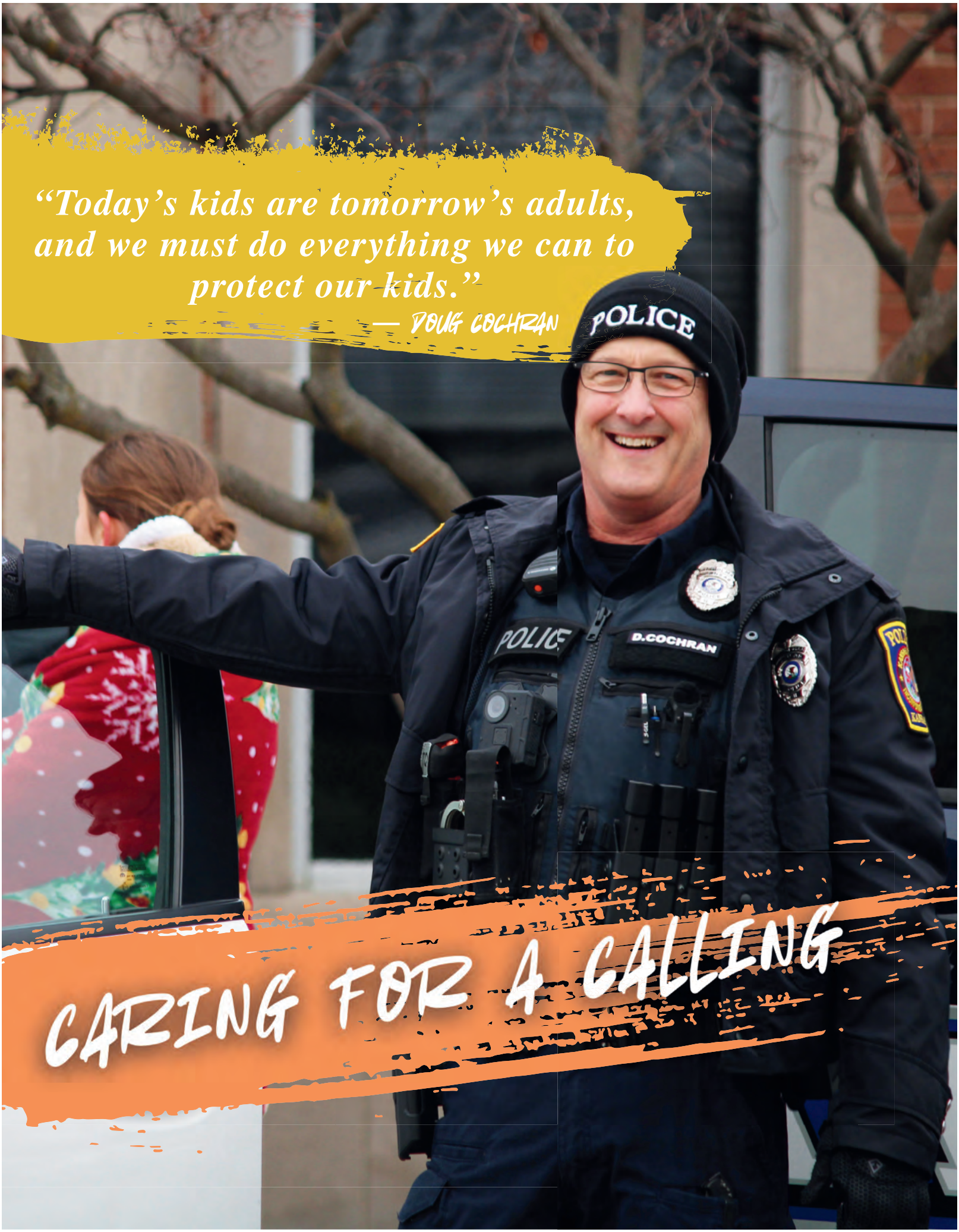
The HOF is housed at Paris Cooperative High School near the concession stand and down the hall from the school gym. Thanks to Terry Elston and State Farm Insurance, the HOF not only features the plaques of the honored teams and individuals, but also a multimedia presentation with digital photos, video and information about the honored teams and individuals. Danette Young maintains the digital HOF.

The committee is already working on the next HOF weekend, tentatively set for Saturday, Feb. 14, when the Tigers face the LaSallete Lions. More details of the induction will be forthcoming once finalized.

"I would like to urge all Paris fans to consider nominating an athlete for consideration," Hughes said.



16HOF.indd 1 7/9/25 11:33 AM



"Today's kids are tomorrow's adults, and we must do everything we can to protect our kids."

— DOUG COCHRAN

CARING FOR A CALLING

17CochranCover.indd 1 7/9/25 4:54 PM

By Bethany Wagoner

In a powerful example of community-driven change, Edgar County has stepped into the spotlight as the first Illinois county to officially join a statewide initiative placing the well-being of children at the forefront of schools, law enforcement and care giving systems.

The program, growing rapidly in popularity and adaptation across the state, is "Handle with Care" a Illinois' Circle of Care initiative.

Kansas Police Officer Doug Cochran, a longtime advocate for child protection and trauma-informed response, has been instrumental in bringing the Handle With Care program to Edgar County. Now serving as the state wide coordinator, Cochran is building bridges between law enforcement, educators and mental health professionals—all with one purpose: to protect and support children in crisis.

"There are a lot of moving parts to this process, but this is probably one of the simplest things that law enforcement can do to effect a positive change in a child's life," Cochran said. "It is a feather in the cap of Kansas and Edgar County to be chosen out of over 1,000 law enforcement agencies across the state as the starting point for this program."

Handle With Care is a program already in use across West Virginia. It functions on a simple idea: when children experience a traumatic event—be it a car accident, domestic disturbance or any other emotionally distressing situation—law enforcement simply notifies the child's school with three words: Handle With Care.

There are no details shared—just a signal that the child may need extra support, time or compassion.



Standing left to right are Special Agent in Charge Johnson, of the FBI, and Doug Cochran. The two met to discuss Handle with Care.



18Cochran.indd 1 7/9/25 12:11 PM



"This program and process just gives educators the chance and the space to allow that child to re-engage and recover," Cochran explained. "We don't tell them what happened, we just tell them something happened. And that changes how that child is seen and supported."

After being clued-in schools can then make decisions based on the child's behavior and needs, including referrals to school-based counselors, mental health professionals or comfort interventions like support bags.

Since Cochran first began working with Circle of Care at the close of last year, every school district in Edgar County has signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) required to participate in the program. Local police departments have also committed to the process, making Edgar County the first unified community in Illinois to implement the program at all levels.

"I wanted to bring Edgar County on board before I brought anyone else on board. This is my home. My kids and my grandkids are here," Cochran said. "Change starts at home ... I am grateful that as the program expands I can say it all started here, and point back to my hometown."

Cochran's dedication and early success are drawing attention far beyond the borders of Edgar County. He's had conversations with members of the Illinois State Police, who have agreed to begin piloting the program with Troop 7 this summer under his guidance, with hopes of launching statewide as early as August.

And the momentum doesn't stop there.

Cochran has also presented the program to the FBI, who responded enthusiastically and are now exploring how federal agents can collaborate with local law enforcement in trauma cases involving children.



"The FBI was so receptive to the meeting, especially once we laid all the information out about the counties and the local agencies working with the schools," he said. "They saw no downside to this, especially when it comes to accidents on the interstate or state routes ... Truly, every law enforcement agency that I have spoken with around the state has been super supportive of the initiative. Everyone cares about our kids and wants the best for them."

In Illinois, Handle with Care operates under the broader umbrella of Circle of Care, a grant-funded, statewide program led by the Illinois Family Resource Center and Hour House. Its mission is to build a network of trained helpers who can meet the emotional needs of children impacted by trauma.

According to Circle of Care Project Coordinator Ambrosia Branson, the program empowers schools to respond with trauma-sensitive interventions. These include increased observation, access to mental health services, and—when necessary—involvement from legal or social services.

Branson hand-selected Cochran to serve as the law enforcement liaison. A decision she refereed to as "one of the best choices we could have made for the program."

Despite the success, and kudos of those around him, Cochran stands by the belief that advocating for children and his community is simply part of "my job and my calling in life."

He describes law enforcement as his most meaningful career, and believes that true community safety starts with emotional security—and that schools, families and first responders must work together to protect and nurture the next generation.

"Kids who have experienced trauma don't always act like victims. They act out, they shut down, they struggle in school," he shared. "But when we respond with care, even just a little bit, we help them find their way back."

With his help, the Handle With Care model offers the care kids in need seek, transforming what could be overlooked or misunderstood behaviors into opportunities for healing.

Now, with Cochran and Edgar County leading the way, Illinois is on the verge of becoming a national model for child-centered collaboration.

"At the end of the day, it's all about the kids," Cochran said. "Today's kids are tomorrow's adults, and we must do everything we can to protect our kids."

19Cochran.indd 1 7/9/25 11:41 AM

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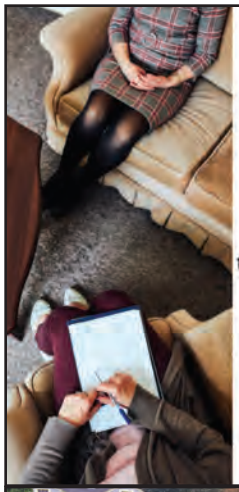
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23HarleeCover.indd 1 7/9/25 10:47 AM



By Victoria Leitch

Harlee Englum Gates is more than just a familiar face. She is a vital support system for numerous families and individuals within Edgar County during the times they need it most.

As a granddaughter of the late Tom Carroll, who built Stewart and Carroll Funeral Home with a reputation for compassion and professionalism, Gates never imagined that she would follow in his footsteps. But when the call came, it felt inevitable.

"In a small community like Edgar County, traditions run deep, and families often stay rooted for generations. As I stepped into my role as the first female funeral director at my family's business, I realized that continuing a legacy can also mean redefining it," she said.

Growing up in the funeral home, Gates saw firsthand how her grandfather's work touched lives. She'd witnessed him quietly comforting families, answering their questions and guiding them through the emotional maze of grief and loss.

"It was normal to be running around in the funeral home. I grew up around here, and I've been around this my whole life," Gates said. "My grandpa was the one who was always here doing the work. I would just be running around and playing with the coloring books in the back, just living my life."

Gates' journey into the world of funeral service was not linear.

Like many young professionals, she explored other avenues. But the echoes of her upbringing—the countless quiet lessons from her grandfather, the moments of witnessing grief transformed into peace—drew her back.

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"Taking on this role wasn't without its challenges. I had people ask, 'Are you sure this is what you want to do?' I always simply answered, 'Yes, I'm sure.' I knew the work we did here was meaningful and had a lasting impact on the families that we serve," she said.

A graduate of Worsham College of Mortuary Science, Gates not only passed both National Board Examinations but also became a licensed life insurance agent in Illinois, equipping her to help families plan with care and intention. She is also a proud member of both the Illinois and National Funeral Directors Associations.

"I always knew I'd end up here somehow," she said. "I just didn't know when or how it would happen. But there was something about this work that I couldn't ignore."

> "Being part of this profession isn't about wearing a suit. It's about meeting people where they are, with whatever they're feeling, no matter the time or the conditions."

But beyond the credentials and titles, Gates carries something less tangible but far more powerful: empathy, authenticity and a fierce commitment to being present for each and every family she encounters.

"Being part of this profession isn't about wearing a suit," she said. "It's about meeting people where they are, with whatever they're feeling, no matter the time or the conditions."

Though funeral service has long been a male-dominated field, Gates' entry into the profession wasn't about making a statement or breaking barriers. It was simply about following her heart. She never felt the need to "prove" herself as a woman in the industry. Instead, her goal was to carry on the work she'd grown up around, but with her own voice, her own approach and her own compassion.



Harlee Englum Gates, far left, inherited her passion of mortuary science from her grandfather, center. She is also the first female funeral director at Stewart & Carroll Funeral Home.



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"I knew I couldn't be (my grandpa)," she said. "But I knew I could carry his legacy on in my own way.

Each day in funeral service is different. One might involve sitting with a grieving family, delicately crafting a service that honors both loss and life. Another might require handling logistics, from confirming clergy and florists to preparing service folders and setting up the chapel. Some days she's behind the scenes in the preparation room, performing what she calls "the last act of human kindness."

"Dignity begins behind the scenes," Gates said. "It's sacred work. You don't rush it. You don't do it halfway. People don't just come to us for the logistics. They come to us because they trust us. And that trust is something that I take seriously. Everyone who walks through our doors becomes a part of the larger family we've built here over the years."

The work is not glamorous. It's emotional, physically demanding and often misunderstood. But Gates embraces it with humility and grace.

"There's something deeply humbling about being the person someone calls on the worst day of their life," she said. "You don't take that for granted. It shapes you. I've learned that silence can be more powerful than words, and that sometimes just showing up is the most profound form of service."

One of Gates' most cherished rituals is reaching out to families long after the services have ended. Whether it's a holiday card or a handwritten note, she believes grief doesn't end when the guests leave, and neither should the support.

"One of the things that I go by is that we are not just here to help people say goodbye, we are here to help them heal.



That has always been the heart of our business and it always will be," she said.

Gates often thinks of her grandfather and wonders what he would say about the direction she's taken. She imagines that he would be proud, not because she's following in his footsteps exactly, but because she's continuing the family legacy in her own way. Gates has worked hard to honor her grandfather's commitment to his community, but she's also redefined the funeral home for a new generation, bringing her own sense of empathy, compassion, and leadership.

"I think about him often," she said. "And I wonder what he would think. But I know he would respect what I've done here. I'm doing this work with my heart, and that's what he would've wanted."

Despite the sometimes emotional toll of the work, Gates is deeply proud of what she does. She believes that her role is not just about helping people say goodbye, but it's about helping them heal. That, she says, has always been the heart of the business.

"I'm not just here to arrange a service," she said. "I'm here to help people navigate some of the hardest moments of their lives. I'm here to offer them a sense of peace and stability when everything feels uncertain."

For Gates, the work is never easy, but it is always meaningful. She's built a career around providing comfort and stability to those in need—and though the challenges are many, the rewards are worth it.

"I'm deeply proud of what we've built here," she said. "It's not just a job; it's a calling. And I'll carry that calling with me for as long as I'm able."

Harlee Englum Gates may be the first woman to lead Stewart and Carroll Funeral Home, but she is far from the last. Through her dedication, empathy and vision, she has not only honored the legacy of her grandfather but has redefined it for a new generation, proving that even in the quietest corners of life's most difficult moments, there is room for evolution, for growth and for healing.

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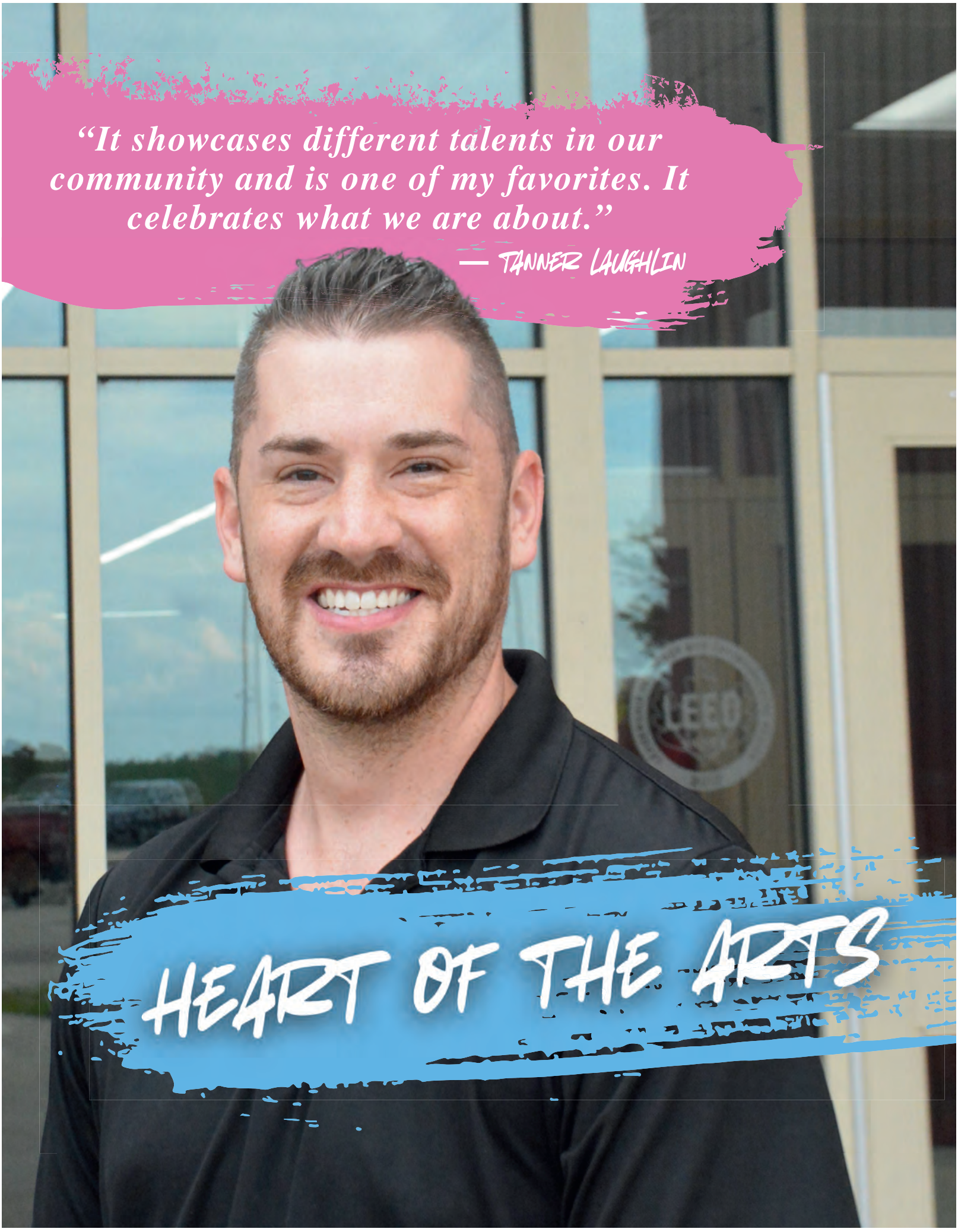
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By Nancy Zeman

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts to Paris and Edgar County residents in modern memory is the Paris Center of Fine Arts, located on the campus of Paris Cooperative High School.

During the run-up to the Paris 95 and Crestwood Unit 4 election to decide if a new co-operative high school should be constructed for the community, the committee working towards making the school a reality received a surprising phone call from Mayor Craig Smith.

Smith had just learned the last survivor of the Lippman-Huston trust had suddenly died as she walked to attend an opera performance in New Mexico.

"She was still relatively young at 71 years old, but she collapsed on the way to a theater," Smith recalled.

The death of Pierce and Suzannah Huston Lippman's only child opened the door for the Lippman-Huston Trust to be used to construct a theater for the Paris community. The sale of the Edgar County farmland netted $3 million to use to build a theater, the mayor said.

"But the great thing was if voters passed the referendum, that $3 million increased to $9-10 million through the program of the Capitol Development Board, paying 70 cents on each local dollar for the construction of the high school," Smith explained.

The trust was transferred to the City of Paris. It specifically outlined who would serve on the community board to plan programming, as well as the color of the main curtain, the type of wood used on the walls, the size of the stage and even the seating arrangements.

"Pierce envisioned a true community facility with music, dance and speakers," Smith said.

Smith described Pierce, Suzannah Lippman and her sister, Elizabeth Huston, as "champions of the Paris community."

"They wanted to provide artistic opportunities for our residents," he said.

PCOFA is also the home for the Paris 95 and Crestwood drama productions, choir, band concerts and community theater.

Perhaps it's difficult to believe, but Paris was without a formal performing arts space from the late 1960s until the new high school opened in 2014.

A vibrant community concert organization continued to use what was once a theater and performance space at the longtime high school until the PHS enrollment ballooned to more than 1,000 students. Unsuccessful elections to expand the high school eventually led to the theater being renovated for additional classrooms, a study hall, offices for guidance counselors and more lockers. Gone were the dressing rooms and the balcony. The stage was carpeted and reduced in size.



PCOFA Board members from left to right: Tanner Laughlin, Sue Ann Casey, Mike Step, Lorraine Bailey, Randi Bohanan, Steve Benefiel, Erika Nail, Harry Hughes, Phil Wright and Susan Arp. Not pictured: Danette Young, Mark Cox and Mary Morgan Ryan.

Drama productions continued in the renovated space while choir and band concerts were moved to Eveland Gym. When the drama program under Daryl Vanlandeghem grew to include musicals, stages were constructed in Eveland Gym. Meanwhile, the community concert group eventually moved its programs to the First Presbyterian Church. Organizers were forced to choose musical shows that could fit into that space.

Once the new and improved theater became a reality, it fell to Paris High School teacher and longtime drama director Dan Lynch to become the first PCOFA manager. Lynch, now the principal of Riverton High School, said there was no playbook on how to operate the theater for community shows.

"The initial design was over budget, so stuff had to be trimmed," he said.

Lynch said he emphasized the importance of a scene shop and storage, as well as a loading dock for equipment for shows. The ticket office was a casualty of the cuts, but a compromise was to make a space available in the chorus/band room facing the theater lobby.

"You have to think of the PCOFA board as producers," Lynch explained, "but none of us had a clue. We operated in a trial-by-fire mode."

In its first year, the PCOFA presented contemporary Christian artists, thanks to the support of the Hasler Foundation. Under Lynch's direction, there were five shows, including fall plays and two musicals.

Kristen Chittick followed Lynch as the center's manager and served for six years before joining her husband, John, on a two-year Peace Corps commitment in Jamaica.

Chittick brought organization and long-range planning to the PCOFA. Under her leadership, the PCOFA board met for a two-day strategic planning session at Step's Station, led by Trisha Vitale. Those meetings set goals, including a long-term objective of making the manager's job a full-time position and, more importantly, plans to attract the community and determine how to serve them.

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"Our goals are for the entire county," she said.

It is unfortunate, Chittick said, that many in Paris consider the theater an "elitist facility," which the former manager said "it is not." PCOFA patrons are not only professionals from the Wabash Valley area but also farmers, retirees and blue-collar workers.

"PCOFA is striving to serve the entire county," she said.

During her tenure, tickets were sold to patrons in eight different states.

Lynch shared information with Chittick on show agents, so she had some contacts to begin thinking about a season. A committee of the PCOFA board provided input, but Chittick found attending art conferences, often accompanied by a board member, to be an effective way to view artist performances.

"People have no idea how much a show costs," she observed.

Among the suggestions from patrons have been "The Nutcracker," "Brett Eldredge" and "The Texas Tenors."

"Those are six-figure shows," Chittick explained. "We can't do a ticket price to compensate for that kind of show."

Thanks to her expertise in writing grants, PCOFA seasons under her leadership expanded to eight shows. Additionally, PCOFA launched a successful season ticket program, with 30 percent of the theater's 500 seats already committed. But Chittick is quick to point out that tickets and donations alone are never going to have the ability to (totally) support the theater.

Due to the location of the theater(14 miles north of I-70 and 40 miles from I-57), Chittick said some shows became more affordable due to routing. She explained that if a show or performer had a show in the Chicago area and the next show was in Kentucky, the artist would much rather perform on an "off" night en route to the next gig.

In addition to expanding the season, Chittick was part of a group of Edgar County residents raising more than $90,000 to purchase a new Yamaha grand piano for the facility, in memory of longtime Paris music educator and musician Moke Owens. Some of the grants the PCOFA was awarded were also used to train students and volunteers in the operation of the lighting system and sound for the theater.

Chittick's greatest satisfaction as a manager was getting people interested in the PCOFA and seeing a community fall in love with a show.

"There's nothing like the feeling of the feedback of a successful, well-received show," she said.

PCOFA board president Steve Benefiel wasn't sure where they would find another theater manager after Chittick left.

It only made sense to talk to Tanner Laughlin, who was directing the PHS drama productions at the time.

Laughlin accepted the position with the caveat that he was just holding it for Chittick's return. Later, Chittick shared that she didn't want to return to the position, and Laughlin was promoted from interim to PCOFA manager.

Benefiel succeeded the late Steve Eitel as board president but brought with him experience from his years on the board of the Little Theater on Square in Sullivan.

That was accomplished with the valuable help of the city treasurer and local CPA Betsy Higginbotham.

"PCOFA remains a committee of the city," Benefiel explained.



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Laughlin said he is "amazed every day" when he walks into the PCOFA, remembering the days of constructing a musical set on the floor of Eveland Gym.

"This is a great place for the community," he noted. "The secret to success is getting butts in the seat from all over the area."

One of the biggest challenges is educating residents about a show.

"Education is the key to attracting those who might have never stepped into the building and exposing them to not only the facility but the great entertainment we offer for everyone," Laughlin said.

Thanks to Laughlin's contacts with artist agents, the manager was able to score an unbelievable guest act: The Vienna Boys Choir. A choir of boy sopranos and altos based in Vienna, Austria. It is one of the best-known boys' choirs in the world. The boys are selected mainly from Austria, but also from many other countries.

The choir is a private, non-profit organization with approximately 100 choristers between the ages of nine and 14. The boys are divided into four touring choirs, named after Austrian composers Bruckner, Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, which combined perform about 300 concerts each year before almost 500,000 people, including a sold-out audience at the PCOFA.

Laughlin said that the concert exposed residents from throughout the area to the PCOFA facility. Additionally, since it was not part of the regular season, the concert generated revenue for the PCOFA. The Paris concert was made possible by the relationship fostered with the agent, and the choir management wanted the group to perform before a concert with the Chicago Symphony.

The 2024-2025 season was the biggest yet, with eight shows for season ticket holders and an additional two shows outside of the season for a total of 10. The manager pointed out that season ticket holders could reserve tickets for the additional shows in their usual seats.

He also emphasized ticket sales alone can't continue to sustain the kind of season the PCOFA has been producing without the extra shows, which provide revenue.

Benefiel agreed that the PCOFA board is working to bring different experiences to the community. Laughlin works with the board's booking committee for ideas and to gauge interest in shows.

"Some members provide ideas based on their experiences at other venues," Laughlin said.

One member proposed "The Red Hot Chili Pipers," a rock-and-roll band and bagpipes group they had seen at an EIU event.

Some of the other shows planned for the season include:

"Rocket Man," an Elton John tribute show featuring Elton John's body double in a full theatrical media show.

"A Night Out with Sinatra," featuring the music of Old Blue Eyes.

"Live from Laurel Canyon Songs and Stories of American Folk Rock," celebrating the artists of Laurel Canyon (1965-1975) with music and stories including the Mamas and the Papas, Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and The Eagles.

Broadway actress and singer Patty Murin, who has played Glinda Upland in the original tour of "Wicked" and who originated the role of Anna on Broadway in Disney's "Frozen."

In addition to the shows each season, the PCOFA also sponsors "Tablescapes," a gala featuring decorated tables from individuals and local groups, accompanied by a catered dinner on the PCOFA stage. It also serves as the announcement of the latest additions to the PCOFA Hall of Fame. Those inducted so far include Ned Jenison, Mary Ann Pearman, Moke Owens and Ethel Marie Crabtree.

"It showcases different talents in our community and is one of my favorites," Laughlin said. "It celebrates what we are about."

Benefiel emphasized that, in addition to purchasing season tickets, there are other ways to support the PCOFA's ongoing mission through planned giving and estate planning. Anyone with a retirement plan may donate their annual required minimum distributions to the organization.

The IRS requires required minimum distributions from certain tax-deferred retirement accounts, like traditional IRAs and 401 (k) s, once a certain age is reached.

"It's a great way to support the PCOFA without tax implications," he said.

A longtime supporter of all the arts in the community and county, one of Benefiel's priorities was to separate the PCOFA accounts from the city to a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization. That was accomplished with the valuable help of the city treasurer and local CPA Betsy Higginbotham.

"PCOFA remains a committee of the city," Benefiel explained. Additionally, PCOFA maintains an agency account through the Edgar County Foundation, which holds over $100,000 in gifts and endowments from local residents.

Laughlin also praised the PCOFA technical crew of Eric Hendrickson and Alex Elmore, who handle sound and lights, respectively, for the shows, as needed.

Anyone interested in supporting the PCOFA may contact Laughlin at info@pcofa.net.

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FROM DIRT TO DESTINY



"There's something special about knowing you're part of something bigger than your own field."

— TYLER BLUE

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By Victoria Leitch

In the rolling fields nestled between Chrisman and Paris, where gravel roads wind past worn red barns and fence posts lean gently into the breeze, a quiet story is unfolding—one that speaks of tradition, determination and the kind of love for the land that gets passed down from one calloused hand to the next.

This is the story of Tyler Blue, a young farmer with an old soul, and a dream that stretches far beyond the horizon.

At just 28 years old, Blue is already deeply rooted in his family's farming legacy, yet he brings a fresh energy to a centuries-old way of life. He doesn't boast or seek attention; he simply works—dawn to dusk, season to season, one acre at a time. And for Blue, there's no such thing as an ordinary day on the farm.

"Ninety-eight percent of my days are different from the next," Blue said.

As seasons roll by, familiar rhythms return: planting in the spring, harvest in the fall and an endless list of tasks in between.

"Right now, we're doing maintenance like washing tractors, fixing planters and stockpiling parts," Blue said. "I like everything to be ready when the time comes. If I hook up the planter next spring, I want it field-ready."

Summers bring the hay, which feeds the cattle through winter. It's a job that never really ends. And when storms blow through, as they often do in this part of Illinois, you'll find Blue out in the fields, checking crops, scouting damage and hoping the worst hasn't come.

"You learn to live with what you can't control. Corn can bounce back. You just have to trust," he said, and in many ways, the statement is a testament to his young life.

In a world that often races forward at lightning speed, Blue is proof that slower, steadier ways still have value. He's not just growing crops. He's cultivating a future for himself, his growing family and the community he treasures.



"I was born and raised on a farm," Blue said. "My folks lived just a couple of miles from where we are now. My dad worked off the farm, and my mom balanced everything else. We had cattle, pigs and a little row cropping. It wasn't enough to make a full-time living, but it was a start."

That start was more than enough for Blue to fall in love with the work, the rhythm and reward of it all. He remembers helping out as a kid, working for local farmers like Jim Dunn, his dad and the Moss family, even before he had his driver's license.

It's those men in his life who helped Blue decide to join a larger farm operation nearby at just 16 years old. For Blue, these men were more than a boss; they were mentors.



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"They taught me morals, work ethic, how to treat people. That's what really shaped me. I started on the hay crew," Blue said. "It's been a huge blessing to learn from that experience while building my own farm on the side."

Despite his attraction to the farm, there was a time, Blue admits, when he wasn't sure he could make farming his full-time future.

"I always thought I'd need a regular job to support it. But the more I tried to think about sitting in an office all day, the more I realized that wasn't for me."

However, with quiet faith and a great deal of prayer, he eventually stepped fully into the world of farming.

"Doors opened. Opportunities came. I can't take the credit—God deserves that," he said.

Like many things in life, farming is never guaranteed, according to Blue. Weather, markets and timing all play a part. But the purpose behind it makes every risk worthwhile.

"It sounds cheesy, but it really is about feeding America. There's something special about knowing you're part of something bigger than your own field," Blue said.

While farming is often portrayed as a solitary pursuit, Blue will be the first to tell you that it takes a village—or in his case, a family. At the heart of all he does, family is the foundation. From his earliest memories to his current operation, family has been by his side.



Tyler Blue, right, credits his late brother Josh, left, as a steady influence in every decision he currently makes at the family farm.



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Blue's late brother, Josh, was once his closest farming partner and remains an enduring presence in every decision he makes.

"We were together constantly—same dreams, same goals," he said. "After losing him, my priorities shifted. I used to be all about the work. Now, I know family and friends are what matter most. That's the greatest wealth."

That great wealth has supported and pushed Blue for his entire life and their impact continues to push him into the field, and make his dream achievable every day.

"Everyone pitches in. It's a family thing. I couldn't do this without them," he said.

His mother, recently retired, now helps with errands, transportation and support. Even his grandmother plays a role, offering rides or delivering lunch when needed.

"Having my wife, Katie, be a part of the farm means a lot to me," Blue said. "She's always willing to drop anything and help however she can. Her job isn't driving a tractor full-time, but she's good at keeping all of the loose ends tied up, as well as being emotionally supportive. That's important."

Currently, the young farmer and his wife are expecting their first child this fall, and he dreams of building a farm that can support them for generations to come.

"I want to grow our operation, but not just for growth's sake," he said. "I want to build something that can last. If our kids want to farm, great. If they don't, that's fine too. They can be landowners. It can still be part of their legacy."

If you ask Blue his favorite part of farming, his answer comes in two parts.

"There's nothing better than starting with a brown field in the spring and seeing it come to life," he said. "You work the ground, fertilize, plant—and then you wait. Once the seed's in the ground, it's out of your hands. You just have to have faith."

Then there's the livestock.

"Seeing a calf born never gets old. Watching it stand up, take those first steps... It's amazing every single time. It reminds you how precious life is," he continued.

But Blue isn't just focused on the land. He has a passion for people, especially young ones who might see farming as an old-fashioned pursuit.

"I tell them not to limit themselves," he said. "There are so many ways to do this work. Ask questions. Meet people. Try things. I've got friends across the state, from Georgetown to southern Illinois, and we all do things differently, but we learn from each other."

Blue remembers two friends from Chicago who visited the farm during college.

"They'd never seen stars before," he said, shaking his head. "That night, they laid on my parents' driveway for over an hour just looking at the sky. It changed how I see everything. You can't take anything for granted."

Today, those same friends still come back to help during harvest.

"They never grew up on a farm, but they fell in love with it. There's something here that speaks to everyone," Blue said.

In the end, Blue isn't just a farmer. He's a reminder that some things are worth building slowly. That family is worth leaning on. That life, even in its hardest moments, is full of beauty.

"You don't do this work for applause," he said. "You do it because it matters."

Whether it's in the fields, in the barn or around the kitchen table with three generations sharing stories, Tyler Blue is tending to a legacy that will nourish long after the tractors are parked and the crops are in.

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By Chris Ingham



Josh Collins isn't what you think of when you hear the word "politician." Still, that hasn't stopped him from throwing his hat in the ring for the Illinois State House of Representatives seat in District 102 that is up for election in 2026. Sitting down with him and his family painted a picture of someone who cares, both for his family and his community.

"I live by two mottos," Collins said. "Be better, and someone has to help."

Collins grew up in Florida, living there his whole life until moving to Paris three and a half years ago.

As a young man, he met his wife, Jessica Jeide, working in the anime convention scene in Jacksonville, Fla. They both attended the same live-action role-play event and hit it off immediately.

"I was climbing two-story tall trees to avoid detection," Collins said. "She was the only one who could find me. It was nerd-love at first sight."

For the next 14 years, they fostered careers at MetroCon, an annual anime convention. Collins was a stunt performer in stage combat shows, Jeide was a costume designer.

"Our twins started walking at the convention," Collins said of MetroCon. "There are pictures of me in a Subzero costume changing a baby's diaper."

When the pandemic hit, the duo decided to step back from the convention for their children's safety. Once they did, they quickly realized that they were less stressed, not being involved in it every year.

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"It takes up a good portion of our life," Collins said. "Three months of training, six months of planning, and then the actual weekend of it."

Collins took advantage of his newfound free time to acquire certifications that let him move into cybersecurity, and he started to work from home. That was when he realized that they needed something different.

> "THIS PLACE GAVE US HOPE, AND I WANT TO HELP SHARE THAT WITH THE REST OF THE PEOPLE AROUND US."

"We were living in a 1,300 square foot, three-bedroom, two bath... After being there our entire lives and having three boys growing up, we needed a change," he said.

He asked his company if they could move away from the office, and with their approval, he and Jeide did a search of "the entire U.S." looking for a house.

"We looked at Alaska, we looked at Hawaii, we looked everywhere, every state, to try and find a house that was big enough for a family of five that was more affordable," Collins said.

Finally, they found Paris.

"We both have a soft spot for historic buildings and especially Victorian houses," he said. "So we moved here for the house and the schools."

The home they found provided space for the children to grow and for them to pursue their own hobbies. Collins said that Jeide has "basically a small farm" in their backyard, and they have regular Nerf wars with their kids - something they didn't have the space to do in Florida.





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When they got here, they noticed that while still living, the town "seems to be getting forgotten, and we want to see it thrive." While that drove Jeide to get involved with things like the community garden in town, it's what drives Collins to run for office.

Collins saw that the District 102 seat had been unopposed in recent elections and decided that he wanted to offer the people of the district the freedom of choice.

"Even if I'm not their choice, at least I know I gave them that choice," Collins said.

Under the current political administration, he wants to help foster a safe, welcoming community for his kids and vulnerable people in Paris and across Illinois.

"It's my job to protect (my kids), and this is the only way that I know how," he said. "I want to insulate our state, I want to insulate our town, I want to put in policies that will keep our economy from being negatively affected."

Collins' core message is that people need to lean on each other.

"We have lost so much empathy and community," he said. "We've been so divided, what we forgot is that if we help and enrich everybody else's lives around us, that it automatically enriches our lives. And right now, there's such an outcry for it."



With that in mind, he hopes to help build ways for people to do just that. While working full time, campaigning and spending time with his family, Collins has worked up policies that he hopes to introduce if he gets elected.

"I have a full, affordable housing plan that doesn't rely on taxes and is self-sufficient," he explained. "I figured out that there's a way to do universal healthcare that will save the state $30 billion, and residents will pay less than what they are on employer insurance. And the employer would pay less as well. I figured out with universal SNAP, since we usually get back more than we are able to spend, it can be used to subsidize our non-corporate smaller farms, to give them the opportunity to diversify some of their crops to be aimed more towards local residents."

"Imagine what I could do if I had time to focus on it," he added.

Meanwhile, Jeide spends her time volunteering with the Bee Well community garden, and trying to help connect the community.

"We love having fun and enjoying life, and involving as much of our community as want to be involved," she explained. The family goes big for Halloween, and in past years, they have opened up their home to anyone who wants to spend the holiday with them.

For his part, Collins spends as much of his free time as he can with his kids.

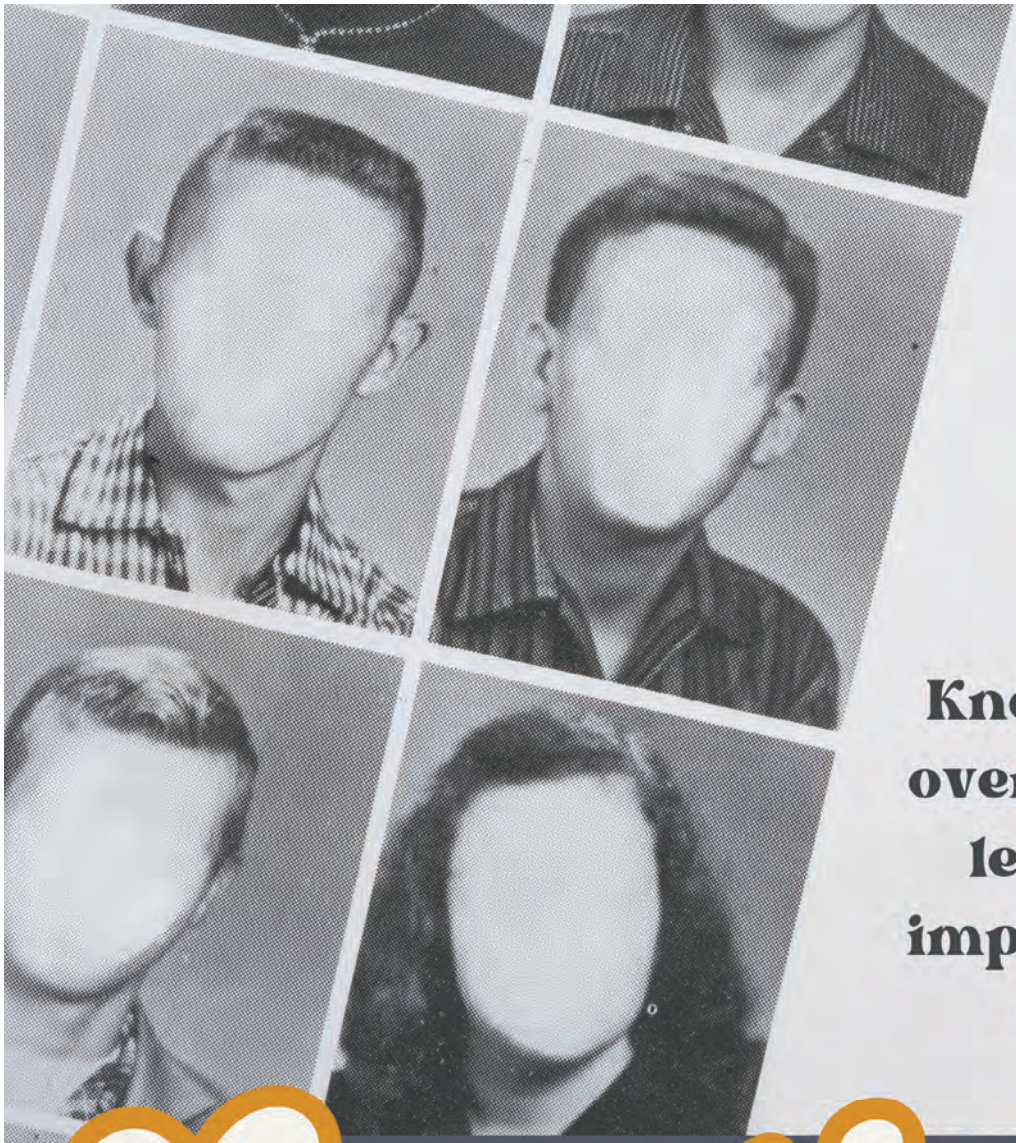
"I make sure that even though they don't seem to want to get out very often, that I create moments, like random Beatsaber family tournaments or random Nerf wars, going out and shooting archery, taking them for a motorcycle ride. I have my thing with each of them," he said.

One thing that comes up over and over when talking to Collins is that he and his family "found their happiness" in Paris.

In his words, "this place gave us hope, and I want to help share that with the rest of the people around us."



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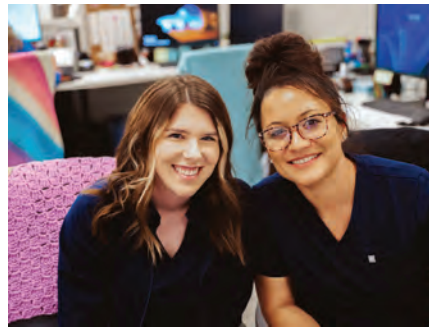
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