

# COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS



## Little cars, big smiles

**Smile makers build  
Toys for God's Kids**  
Pages 8-9

**Treatment center  
changes young lives**  
Pages 12-13

Asher Smith plays with a few  
of the thousands of small  
wooden cars built each year  
by Toys for God's Kids



*Welcome to the  
LREA Family  
Ellie!*

*Proud parents  
Mat & Megan  
Lynde welcomed  
their daughter  
Ellie Linn Lynde  
to the world  
10/13/22.*

*Mat is a  
Lineman at Lake  
Region Electric.*

## WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

**Donald & Donna Moses**

**Nicole Rumpca**

**Marjorie Hoglund**

**Andrew Hubble**

**Chapin Lake Property**

**Nathan & Natasha Schultz**

**William and Lisa Bucklin**



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# Deck your halls with home safety in mind

It's time to deck those halls - safely. More than 800 home fires are caused by holiday decorations each year, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

An additional 170 home fires are caused by Christmas trees each year. Keep these tips in mind for a safe holiday season:

- Carefully inspect all electrical decorations before you use them. Cracked or damaged sockets and loose or exposed wires can cause serious shock or start a fire.
- Make sure all extension cords and electrical decorations are being used properly - indoor-rated cords indoors, outdoor-rated cords for outside decorations.
- Inspect extension cords for damage and discard (not repair) any that are not completely intact.
- Never mount or support light strings in a way that might damage the cord's insulation.
- Outdoor electrical lights and decorations should be plugged into circuits protected by ground-fault circuit interrupters.
- Exercise caution when decorating near power lines. Keep yourself and your ladder at least 10 feet from power lines.
- Turn off all indoor and outdoor electrical decorations before leaving home or going to sleep.
- Avoid overloading electrical outlets with too many decorations or electrical devices. They can overheat and cause a fire.
- Never connect more than three strings of incandescent lights together.
- Water your Christmas tree daily.
- Keep all decorations at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
- Avoid using candles. The flames are just too dangerous with all the flammable decorations around.
- Purchase electrical decorations from reputable retailers and that are approved by a nationally recognized testing lab such as UL, Intertek or CSA.

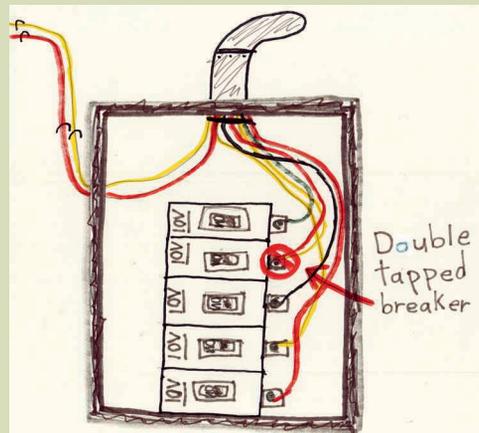


## A NEW TEACHING TOOL FOR SOLAR POWER EDUCATION



Rushmore Electric and Touchstone Energy have joined together to construct a demo trailer designed to teach co-op members across the state more about how solar power functions. The trailer is equipped with fold-out collection panels and also battery storage capability. Co-op energy experts use the trailer to frame discussions about net metering, interconnection agreements and more.

To see a video of the trailer and learn more about how electric cooperatives serve our members, visit Cooperative Connections Plus by scanning the QR code at right.



## Don't play on transformer boxes

### Olaf Sahlstrom

Olaf Sahlstrom, 9, shares a tip he learned from his parents, Ben and Naomi Sahlstrom: Double-tapped breakers are unsafe and can lead to overheating, arcing, and electrical fires. The Sahlstroms reside in Tracy, MN and are members of Lyon-Lincoln Electric Cooperative.

Kids, send your drawing with an electrical safety tip to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). If your poster is published, you'll receive a prize. All entries must include your name, age, mailing address and the names of your parents. Colored drawings are encouraged.

# CHRISTMAS DESSERTS

## PEANUT BUTTER PIE

**Ingredients:**

1 heaping c. peanut butter  
 1 8 oz. pkg. cream cheese  
 (softened)  
 1 8 oz. tub cool whip (thawed)  
 1/2 c. milk  
 2 c. powdered sugar graham  
 cracker pie crust (prepared)  
 Crushed Butterfingers or Reeses  
 for garnish

**METHOD**

Thoroughly mix peanut butter and cream cheese. Add 1/2 cup milk and slowly add 2 cups powdered sugar. Mix well. Fold in cool whip. Put in a prepared graham cracker crust. Makes two 9" pies or one 10" pie with a little extra. Top with crushed candy. Place in freezer until frozen. Remove from freezer 10 minutes before serving.

**Elaine Rieck, Harrisburg**

## HOLIDAY HOT CHOCOLATE

**Ingredients:**

8 qt. box powdered milk  
 1 lb. can Nestles Cocoa Mix  
 7-8 oz. jar powdered creamer  
 3 c. powdered sugar  
 1/3 c. cocoa

**METHOD**

Mix in order given in large bowl. Put in air tight container. Use 1/4 cup mix per cup of hot water. Makes about 16-cup mix.

**Phyllis Niemann, Clear Lake**

## MOM'S CHRISTMAS DESSERT

**Ingredients:**

2-1/2 c. Rice Krispies  
 1/2 c. light brown sugar  
 1 c. slivered almonds or toasted  
 nut meats  
 1/2 c. butter, melted  
 1/2 gal. vanilla ice cream  
 1 can pie cherries  
 1/2 tsp. almond flavoring

**METHOD**

Mix first four ingredients together. Spread half mixture in a 9x13 pan evenly. Cut and press vanilla ice cream on top and spread remaining mixture on top. Freeze. When ready to serve, stir pie filling and almond flavoring together and heat on stove top or microwave and use for topping individual pieces.

**Patty Sinning, Lennox**

## GINGERBREAD KISSED THUMBPRINT COOKIES

**Ingredients:**

3 c. flour  
 2 tsps. ground ginger  
 1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
 1 tsp. baking soda  
 1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg  
 1/4 tsp. salt  
 3/4 c. (1-1/2 sticks) butter,  
 softened  
 3/4 c. firmly packed brown sugar  
 1/2 c. molasses  
 1 egg  
 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract  
 1/4 c. granulated sugar  
 60 milk chocolate kisses

**METHOD**

Mix flour, ginger, cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg and salt in large bowl. Set aside. Beat butter and brown sugar in large bowl with electric mixer on medium until light and fluffy. Add molasses, egg and vanilla; mix well. Gradually beat in flour mixture on low speed until well mixed. Press dough into a thick flat disk. Wrap in plastic wrap. Refrigerate 4 hours or overnight. Preheat oven to 350°F. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll in granulated sugar to coat. Place 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake 8-10 minutes or until edges of cookies begin to brown. Immediately press a chocolate candy into center of each cookie. Remove to wire racks; cool completely. Store cookies in airtight container up to 5 days.

**mccormick.com**

**Please send your favorite recipes to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). Each recipe printed will be entered into a drawing for a prize in December 2022. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.**

# Attention High School Juniors and Seniors How would you like a FREE trip to the nation's capital?

Lake Region Electric will sponsor one or two area high school juniors and seniors on an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. The week-long trip will be held on June 17-23, 2023.

Each June, over 1,800 high school juniors and seniors travel to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Rural Electric Youth Tour. During the week, they learn about the nation's capital, government, cooperative philosophy, and rural electrification. The delegates are selected and sponsored by their local rural electric cooperatives. The South Dakota Rural Electric Association (SDREA) coordinates arrangements for the South Dakota students.

Some of the sites that may be toured are the Lincoln Memorial, The White House, Air and Space Museum, Washington Monument, U.S. Capitol, Ford's Theatre, The Kennedy Center, Arlington National Cemetery, Mount Vernon, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, The Smithsonian, Iwo Jima Statue, U.S. Supreme Court, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Students will also meet with the South Dakota Congressional Delegation.

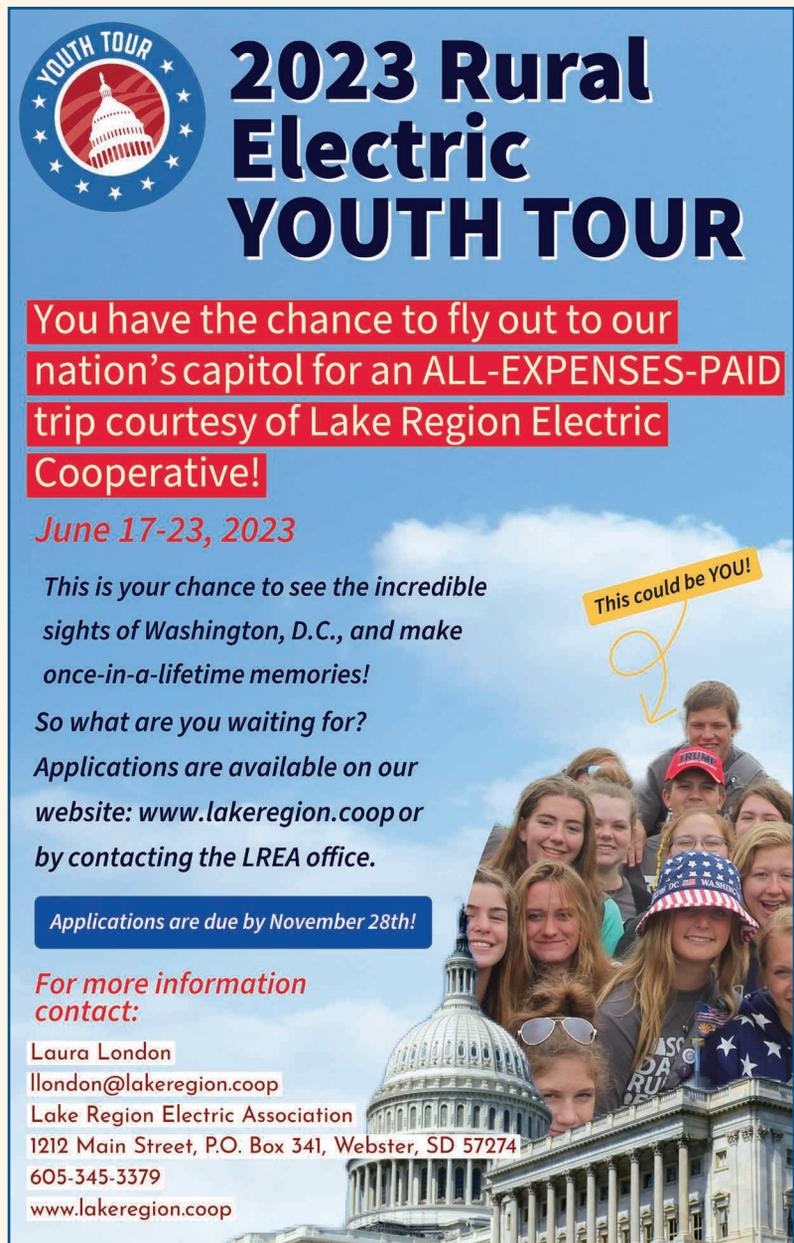
**Who is Eligible?** Area high school juniors and seniors whose parents or legal guardians are members of LREA.

**What Does It Cost?** This trip is free for students. Lake Region Electric, along with the other electric cooperatives that participate in the week-long event, fund the tour. The student's transportation, room and board, entertainment, and sightseeing events are covered by LREA. Students are encouraged to provide their own spending money.

**How do I Qualify?** Delegates will be selected by LREA after all applications and statements or essays are reviewed. Each entrant must submit an application and short statement or essay, not to exceed 250 words, explaining how this all expenses paid trip would bring value to their life. Statements must be neat in appearance and included with the application. Applications are available at [www.lakeregion.coop](http://www.lakeregion.coop) or at the co-op office in Webster. For details call Laura at 605-345-3379.

**"This is a trip of a lifetime made available to local students. Apply today!"**

**- Youth Tour Coordinator Laura London**



The graphic features a blue background with a circular logo on the left containing the text 'YOUTH TOUR' and an illustration of the U.S. Capitol dome. To the right of the logo, the text '2023 Rural Electric YOUTH TOUR' is displayed in large, bold, white letters. Below this, a red banner contains the text 'You have the chance to fly out to our nation's capitol for an ALL-EXPENSES-PAID trip courtesy of Lake Region Electric Cooperative!'. Underneath, the dates 'June 17-23, 2023' are written in red. A yellow callout bubble with a hand-drawn arrow points to a group of smiling high school students, with the text 'This could be YOU!'. Below the students, the text 'So what are you waiting for? Applications are available on our website: [www.lakeregion.coop](http://www.lakeregion.coop) by contacting the LREA office.' is written. A blue box contains the text 'Applications are due by November 28th!'. At the bottom, contact information is provided: 'For more information contact: Laura London, llondon@lakeregion.coop, Lake Region Electric Association, 1212 Main Street, P.O. Box 341, Webster, SD 57274, 605-345-3379, [www.lakeregion.coop](http://www.lakeregion.coop)'. The background of the graphic shows a large image of the U.S. Capitol dome and a group of diverse high school students smiling.

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# The Clauses share stories of Christmas seasons past

**Billy Gibson**

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

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If you want to be a big-time Santa, it's all about the beard.

These days, there's no place in the department store Santa scene for spurious scruff. Don't even try faking it. The kids can spot a fraud from halfway across the food court.

Sporting a convincing set of whiskers is how Curt Winquist scored a serious prime-time Santa gig more than 10 years ago.

He always dressed up as Santa Claus each Christmas to entertain local kids using the same homemade suit that his dad donned before him. But as it often happens with middle aged men and their suits, this one started shrinking and getting appreciably tighter...especially around the mid-section.

So, Winquist found himself shopping for a new suit at a costume store in Sioux Falls when he was approached by a stranger who just so happened to be connected with a photography company. She took one look at the humble farmer from Alcester and told him he was about to join the top ranks as a "professional department store Santa."

"I told her I only knew how to farm and milk cows," Winquist recalled. "She put my name on the standby list and later I got a call. They said a Santa at a mall in Connecticut had a heart attack and died and they needed someone right away. I didn't even have time to get ready. It was on-the-job training."

He soon found himself being flown to the Brass Mill Center located in Waterbury, CT. For the next 38 days, he played Santa for upwards of 14,000 kids, some of whom only met with failure when they tried to yank off his beard.

Winquist, who is a member of Union



**THE CLAUS COUPLE**

Carla and Curt Winquist of Alcester enjoy entertaining hundreds of children each holiday season.

County Electric while his son is a lineman at Southeastern Electric, spent the next six years traveling to Waterbury each Christmas season. The company he worked for put him up in the local Hilton and provided a security team each morning as he made his way to breakfast in the hotel restaurant and then off to the mall. It was strongly suggested that he not leave the hotel for any other reason lest he be spotted by mall patrons and his identity revealed.

Even his wife, Carla, got in on the act and served as Mrs. Claus for several seasons. The Connecticut gig ended in 2017, and these days the two are seen at smaller and more private venues such as day care centers, nursing homes, birthday parties and schools.

Along the way, the Winquists discovered that portraying Santa and Mrs. Claus doesn't always come with lots of laughter and bellies that shake like jelly.

Especially in December of 2012. That's the year, just three weeks before Christmas, that 26 people were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT. The massacre occurred just 20 miles from the mall where Winquist worked each season.

Winquist found himself having to take the service elevator and exit through the back door to evade kids in the hotel lobby.

"There were families of the victims who were staying at the hotel and they were upset and crying and we didn't want the kids to see Santa walking through the lobby in that situation when they were heading out to funerals," he said. "It was just horrible because there was such grief, but then there were people who had no connection to the killings and they just wanted things to be normal. I had to switch my mind on and off. You just want to make the kids and the families feel better."

The Winquists have reams of stories to tell from the past as they continue their roles as the Claus couple from the North Pole. In fact, they've written a book about their experiences entitled "Santa's Christmas Diary," which is available on Amazon.

"It has been a big thrill for us. We work pretty well together as a team," Curt said. "She does a good job of calming kids down when they get nervous about sitting on Santa's lap, or if the lines get long and the kids start getting antsy. I love Mrs. Claus!"



LeRoy Iedema, Richard Ringling and Duane Strand crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year from their 12x10-foot workshop in Platte. Photo by Billy Gibson

## Duane Strand gets lots of 'smileage' out of making toy cars for children

**Billy Gibson**

editor@sdrea.coop

Frustrated moms across the ages have been searching for a surefire method for getting an unruly child to simmer down.

Duane Strand is pretty sure he's found a failsafe solution: toy cars.

Several years ago, Strand began building tiny wooden cars in his nondescript backyard shed in Platte. He recalls visiting Pierre one evening and having dinner at a local restaurant when a young boy suddenly started pitching a fit and hollering at the top of his lungs.

Strand just happened to have one of the cars in his pocket. He reached out and handed it to the child and was rather amazed at the result. Not only did the whining stop forthwith, but that boy's frown turned upside down as the

kid started beaming from ear to ear.

"He quit yelling right then and there. His whole attitude changed," Strand recalls. "These cars really have a soothing effect on the kids."

That's the impact Strand is shooting for as he and his three-man team of retirees crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year. They're looking to squeeze all the "smileage" they can get out of the toy cars they build.

The main construction crew includes retired farmer Richard Ringling and retired mechanic LeRoy Iedema. Ringling usually works the drill press to create holes in the wood where the axles will go. Then Iedema follows up by pressing the wheels onto the axles. He came up with a way to make sure the wheels roll straight and stay in place and dares anyone to try and pull off a wheel.

There are others who join in the

process: Justin Kok cuts the wood into manageable blocks; Brett Wynia performs repairs on the drill presses, band saws, sanders, routers and other pieces of equipment when they break down; and Curtis Versteeg helps to sand down the rough surfaces on the cars.



Toy cars are distributed by military personnel serving overseas.

And just down the road from the shop is the Platte Lumber Yard, where many of the material supplies are stored until needed for production. Strand said it was the folks down at the lumber yard who initiated the vital connection with



Dustin Knutson of Boyds Hardwood Gunstock supplies the toy makers with the laminated wood used to create the tiny cars (inset) for worldwide distribution. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

Boys Hardwood Gunstock that keeps the operation humming along.

“Without Boyds we wouldn’t be able to do any of this,” Strand said.

Dustin Knutson, a member of Central Electric Cooperative and part owner of the company that bills itself as the largest after-market gun stock maker in the world, is a Shriner with a heart for community service and said he was all-in when Strand approached him about supporting the program by supplying excess wood.

“They’re really easy to work with,” he said, noting that he keeps one of the cars on his desk. “They take whatever they can get and they show up consistently. We started saving off-cut blocks of wood specifically for the cars. The laminated wood works well because it’s colorful and looks good and the kids can pick out their favorite one.”

Strand’s distribution system is a bit scatter shot but he still manages to send them all over the globe. Anyone he knows who is planning a trip gets a supply of cars. Knutson, for instance, takes them with him when he travels for business or pleasure, whether vacationing in Mexico or hunting in Africa.

“People in America may think these are just simple toys, but I’ve been in parts of the world where a toy for a kid is a stick and a rock,” Knutson said. “But these little cars give kids something to smile about. Duane and his guys are just beautiful people doing good things for the good of humanity and we’re happy to help them any way we can.”

The toys also ride along in ambulances, military satchels and police vehicles in the event a child needs to be calmed. They show up in doctor’s offices, churches and other venues.

The operation is affiliated with a group called Toys for God’s Kids, a non-denominational organization based in Denver. Strand is the only affiliated “smile maker” in South Dakota.

While the three-man crew claims they’re working harder than they used to before retiring, Iedema assigns a greater value to his toil beyond the opportunity to put a smile on a kid’s face. He said his heart doctor has informed him that he’s in better shape than before he started woodworking three years ago. He’s slimmer, more active and feels a lot better.

Strand chips in, “...yeah, and he’s



more ornery than ever, too!”

Collectively, the guys crank out about 250 cars a day scrunched inside the 12 x 10-foot shed. Each unit has to be dipped in linseed oil to protect children from any potential toxicity. The toys are boxed and shipped to their destination at the recipient’s expense.

Strand doesn’t know how much longer he’s going to be able to keep cranking out cars. He’ll reach the age of 90 in a few months and his friend Ringling has a plan: “I told him when he turns 90 we’re going to take him up by the interstate and take a picture underneath the sign that says I-90. Get it?”

# Reflections on a successful 2022

My goodness time does fly by fast. With Christmas just around the corner and Lake Region's construction season behind us, I would like to take a look at this past year. There are a lot of things going on in this world, both good and not so good, but here at Lake Region I think we have had a pretty good year!

What a productive and positive construction season we had! The Operations Department has been working hard on many projects throughout the year. The outside contractors are wrapping up construction exactly as planned. The weather was cooperative, for the most part, which always helps. We never know what mother nature has in store for us here in this part of the country. We know that one thing we can count on is that the weather is bound to change, and the wind is almost always going to blow. This year we were fortunate enough to not have had any major storms so that our contractors could stay on schedule. Our Operations Department has been working on overhead to underground primary line conversion. Some areas of focus have been in the Waubay and north of Webster areas. The outside contractors are finished up, but our line crews will continue to work on construction plans over the next couple of months. Even when the weather gets cold and miserable, our linemen are out there working through it. I know we all appreciate their hard work and dedication. We have worked with East River Electric to accommodate the new transmission lines from south of Langford to the Britton substation. Lake Region crews also have installed new underground lines west of Britton in order to convert from overhead, in conjunction with the Department of Transportation in the widening of Highway 10 project.

One of the biggest frustrations of 2022 was the supply chain issues. For one reason or another the utility industry has experienced problems getting supplies needed for almost all of our departments. While Lake Region does a good job of projecting and keeping certain items on hand, we still have faced a few struggles. I would like to extend an extra thank you to Leonard, our Material Clerk, for working extra hard this year communicating with vendors to make sure that we have materials at the ready when we need them for construction or repairs. Our local businesses have been working hard to help us maintain equipment since ordering

new has been a bigger challenge than ever before.

The Service Department has had work scheduled non-stop throughout the year and they have been busy trying to meet the needs and requests of our members. Our electricians had some larger jobs wiring shops and new homes in addition to smaller wiring and repair jobs as well as trenching. Because of the supply issues, workload for our electricians, and Service Department in general, I want to remind our members to make Lake Region Electric one of your first phone calls when you are planning a new project.



**Tim McIntyre**  
General Manager



Lake Region Electric remains financially strong, thanks to the hard work of the employees, staff, and board members. If you attended the Annual Meeting, you heard President Pearson give Donna and her team special recognition for their diligence and oversight of our financials. I completely agree with him and want to say that I appreciate the hard work. It takes more than one department to keep our finances in order, but Donna goes to great lengths to ensure we remain in good financial standing. Our board of directors has great oversight of our budget and spending. The director's and manager's strategic planning has led us to financial strength for at least the past 10 years. This past year was no different and I look forward to continuing financial stability under this board's governance.

We have been very blessed at Lake Region Electric Association. I am very thankful that during these trying times our cooperative continues to work together and move forward in a positive direction. I wish you all a very merry Christmas!

Thank you & God Bless,  
Timothy McIntyre





# CHANGING YOUNG LIVES

The Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

## Treatment center helps young people get back on the right path

**Billy Gibson**

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

It was a small compliment, but it meant everything to the young lady who wasn't quite accustomed to receiving positive reinforcement. A simple affirmation spoken softly and sincerely into her ear: "You're gorgeous, and you're worthy." And the tears began to flow.

The Indian Health Service Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse and find the support they need to deal with difficult situations.

Acting Clinical Director Charita Dowdell remembers that encounter with the young woman.

"I tell all of our residents how gorgeous they are and that I see the beauty in them and who they are deep down inside," Dowdell said. "I told her she was worthy and that she had value,

and she just broke down. She told me that nobody had ever said that to her."

That's just one of the stories about how the treatment center's staff strive to change the lives of teens who enter the program. There are many others.

Program Director Lavon Booth has been involved with the residential program for 20 years, initially as an administrative officer when she started in 2002. She previously served at the Cheyenne River Service Unit in her hometown of Eagle Butte before starting at the YRTC.

She sees the transformation of residents captured in plain view during graduation ceremonies that take place when the 12-week session concludes.

"We're very fortunate to see the change that happens in our residents from the time they arrive until the time they graduate," she said. "We see them moving in a positive direction and at graduation we get to hear them speak intimately about what they've learned and you see how it all comes together.

They come in very shy and reserved, and they leave here carrying a more positive spirit and more confidence. It's really touching for us and very rewarding."

The treatment center is housed in the old Chief Gall Inn hotel on land leased from the Standing Rock tribe. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 are referred through tribal alcohol programs, local schools, community service organizations and other agencies.

According to the center's mission statement, the program "is dedicated to promoting a healthy lifestyle restoring balance and harmony in mind, body and spirit to our American Indian youth and their families."

Dowdell said playing a role in watching that mission statement come true to life in the form of changed behaviors and more positive attitudes makes her know she's definitely making a profound difference.

One effective modality is a mentoring program where residents taking part in the rehabilitation process shepherd those who are just entering the facility. Not only do the incumbent residents show the newbies around the physical



The youth treatment center is located in the former Chief Gall Inn hotel near Mobridge. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

space, but they also listen to their concerns, answer questions and try to allay their fears that stem from living in a new environment with certain rules, guidelines and expectations.

“When they start feeling homesick or afraid or stressed and they just need someone near their age to talk to, it helps them make the adjustment so they can settle down and focus on what they need to do to make changes. That bond is something that actually helps both of them get through and graduate successfully,” she said.

Dowdell noted there is a concern among staff about residents returning to a challenging environment. So, upon graduation, the youth receive support through a tracking system where staffers make regular check-in calls after three days, three months, six months and a year. A tele-health network is also

available to the graduates.

Role-playing also helps re-integration, Dowdell said. She added that the residents are taught to anticipate the same kind of challenges they faced before and how to handle them with a different approach.

“They return as a changed person, but everybody else around them will be doing the same things,” she said. “We tell them to stay connected to their support system and manage their emotions; how to be true to yourself while being respectful to others. We prepare them for what life is going to look like when they leave.”

She mentioned one particular youngster who entered the program with a defiant attitude and dealing with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. She knuckled down academically and caught up to her class grade. After

graduation, she returned to juvenile detention for seven months. But in the end, she straightened out her life by applying the things she learned at the center.

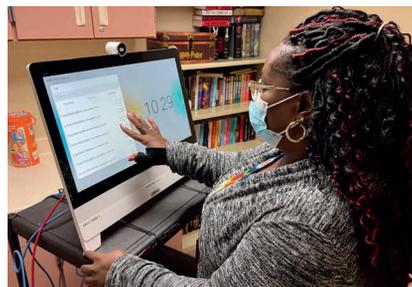
“She struggled with treatment, but she sent us a letter thanking us for what the program did for her,” Dowdell said. “She said she was grateful for giving her the skills to manage the difficult predicament she was going through. She changed her mentality and grew and matured and became a new person.”

Dowdell stressed that parents can play a key role in helping their children navigate through rehabilitation or prevent them from becoming a candidate in the first place.

“Listen to your children,” she emphasized. “They are saying something to you, but often they don’t feel like they’re being heard. Before you shut that door, listen to what they’re saying. You may have to shut the door anyway, but at least take the time to listen to what they have to say.”

Visit [www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrct/](http://www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrct/).

Lavon Booth, left, and Charita Dowdell, work to provide students the skills they need to change the direction of their lives.





# SANTA SACS FOR KIDS

The Botkins - Amanda, Dean, Elizabeth, Anna and Eric - work as a team to provide gift bags for students. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

## Botkin family creates Santa Sacs program to spread holiday cheer

**Billy Gibson**

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Each Christmas season, the Botkin family home nestled in the foothills just outside of Spearfish is transformed from a cozy chalet-style space into a tightly managed, finely tuned assembly center.

The goal is to produce dozens of cinch sacks full of Christmas gifts for school-age children. There's even a name for the operation: Santa Sacs for Kids.

Amanda Botkin and her husband, Eric, have spent the past 10 yuletide seasons organizing the program and working in conjunction with local school counselors to connect with students and distribute the gift bags. When the calendar page flips to December, the Botkins and their three children ages 8 through 14 kick into high gear and the home starts buzzing with activity.

To achieve maximum efficiency – or possibly to prevent the family pets from completely freaking out - the process is

departmentalized. In the kitchen area, bags are filled with coloring books and stickers and small toys for kindergarten and elementary school children. In the living room, items specifically for older female students are gathered up and placed in pink plastic sacks. Down the hallway, fast-food gift cards, winter hats and personal hygiene products like body wash and shampoo for high schoolers are collected and deposited in the totes.

Closer to Christmas and before school lets out for the break, the bags are loaded up in the family Sequoia and transported to counselors at different schools in the area.

The entire program was Amanda's brainchild, which stemmed from her quest for a way to spark a spirit of giving and community service within her own children – and most of all, a sense of gratitude for blessings received.

“My oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was in kindergarten and I just felt that it was very important for my kids to understand how fortunate we are as a



Eric's sister, Amy Irion, also enjoyed participating in the annual project.

family. They need to know what it's like to do things for others,” she said. “Not everybody has a Christmas that looks like ours does.”

Amanda, who works as a nurse in Spearfish, contacted local school counselor and personal friend Mandi Scott and shared the details of her plan. Scott climbed aboard without hesitation. Then Amanda hopped on social media to seek support from other friends, relatives and anyone else interested in contributing to the project. The response was overwhelming.

“We've received so much help from so many people who were willing to donate items or funds to buy gifts,” she said. “But we wouldn't be able to do



Anna Botkin, a student at Spearfish Middle School, has learned that it's more important to give than to receive. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

anything without participation from our counselors. We do everything through them and everything is anonymous with the kids. They give us the ages and genders and we put together the Santa Sacs for them based on the information we get. School counselors have a really hard job and don't always get the recognition they deserve, so we want them to know how much we appreciate what they do and the critical services they provide. They're amazing!"

While Amanda says that pursuing the project is its own reward, occasionally the counselors will forward messages of thanks they've received from students.

"It's nice to get notes when the kids send them," Amanda said. "But it's mostly about trying to give them the kinds of gifts that they'll like or use or have fun with."

Eric Botkin said he was gung-ho from the beginning when his wife approached him with her plans. He describes the influence his single mother had on developing his understanding of charity. When he was younger, his mom worked

Elizabeth was a youngster when her mother started Santa Sacs for Kids and helps each year to stuff and distribute gift bags.

at a nursing home in Douglas, WY, and he and his siblings would spend Christmas visiting with residents and giving them presents. When Eric was in high school, his mother was a patrolling police officer and used her position to serve others and help solve problems.

During the first year of Santa Sacs for Kids, Eric's role was to take care of the younger kids, Anna and Dean, while kindergartner Elizabeth played the role of Amanda's elf.

"I kept an eye on the kids while Elizabeth and Amanda went out and shopped," Eric said. "But then as the years went along, the number of bags and gifts kept growing. We needed



every hand in the house and whatever volunteers we could get. Amanda has a huge heart and is a great person and always tries to make sure there are nice things in the bags. She wants the kids to all love what they get."

Amanda, not exactly a loafer, has bigger dreams for the program she created: "I'd really like to get more of the surrounding communities involved and put more bags out there. There's so much need."

She would also like to see more older kids get involved in Christmas giving projects so that they can learn the lessons that Elizabeth has learned.

Elizabeth, a 14-year-old freshman at Spearfish High School, is a track and wrestling athlete and also participates in Spartans for Spartans, a group that helps elementary students make a smoother transition to middle school.

"I like getting Christmas presents, but it's more important to give to others," she said. "I like doing something positive with my family and it's great knowing I'm helping other kids make their lives better."

For those who wish to donate, visit <https://gofund.me/2f62016a>.

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**December 15-18, 2022**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

To have your event listed on this page, send complete information, including date, event, place and contact to your local electric cooperative. Include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Information must be submitted at least eight weeks prior to your event. Please call ahead to confirm date, time and location of event.

**NOV. 25**  
**Olde Tyme Christmas Kick-off and Parade**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 25**  
**"Light up the Night" Parade and Fireworks**  
Belle Fourche, SD

**NOV. 25-26**  
**Kris Kringle Kraft Fair**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 26**  
**Gregory Mid-Winter Fair**  
Gregory Auditorium  
Gregory, SD  
605-830-9778

**DEC. 2-3**  
**Christmas in the Hills**  
Mueller Center  
Hot Springs, SD  
605-745-4140

**DEC. 3**  
**Santa's Thrift Village**  
Minneluzahan Senior Center  
Rapid City, SD  
605-394-1887

**DEC. 3**  
**Tabor's Holiday Light Parade**  
Tabor, SD  
605-660-0274

**DEC. 3**  
**Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course**  
Olive Grove Golf Course  
Groton, SD  
605-397-4653

**DEC. 3**  
**Julefest 2022: Scandinavian Christmas Festival & Bazaar**  
8 a.m.-2p.m.  
Our Savior's Lutheran Church  
Spearfish, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Sioux Falls Legion Post 15 Pancake Breakfast**  
8:30 a.m.-noon  
1600 W Russell St.  
Sioux Falls, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Hartford Hometown Christmas**  
Hartford, SD  
www.hartfordhtc.com

**DEC. 4**  
**Walk Through Bethlehem**  
United Methodist Church  
Webster, SD  
605-345-3747

**DEC. 10**  
**Frontier Christmas**  
Fort Sisseton Historic State Park  
Lake City, SD  
605-448-5474

**DEC. 10**  
**Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services**  
Groton, SD  
605-397-3333

**DEC. 15-18**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

**JAN. 14**  
**Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament**  
Registration Starts at 1 p.m.  
\$80 for a four-person team  
Meadowood Lanes  
Rapid City, SD  
605-393-2081

**Note: Please make sure to call ahead to verify the event is still being held.**