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The Humanitarians Issue
What’s inside:
- **Angel Tree Program**: With participation comes dignity and Christmas joy for all
- **COMEA House**: This time of year the focus is not on homelessness, it's about the restoration of normalcy
- **St. Joseph's Food Pantry**: Helping thousands of families for more than 30 years

and much more!

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—Henry Books Adams

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Salvation Army’s Angel Tree:

Helping ensure no child goes without Christmas presents

By Rachel Girt
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

The Salvation Army Lts. Chad and Mistie Lamb don’t want to see families that are struggling to make ends meet not be able to give their children presents at Christmas.

The Angel Tree program, offered through The Salvation Army, an international faith-based organization, provides new toys and clothing to children in need in Laramie County. Assistance is offered for children from low-income families, and families apply for the program in early fall. Children accepted into the program become “angels.”

“Every child should be able to experience the joy of Christmas morning,” said Chad Lamb, who, along with his wife, is corps officer and business administrator at the Cheyenne Corps and Community Center. “We changed our Angel Tree program last year to allow parents to come to our building and pick out their kids’ gifts.”

The program change gives parents their dignity and allows them to participate in giving their kids Christmas joy, Chad explained.

“We rely on documentation from Black Hills Energy’s low-income energy program,” Chad said, pointing out that buying Christmas gifts may be hard to afford if a family has difficulty paying their heating bill.

The program relies on the generosity of the community to be successful, Chad said. Last year, the program provided more than 4,800 gifts and clothing items to about 400 children in the Cheyenne area.

Beginning in early November, The Salvation Army volunteers started the toy drive with collections at the local Wal-Mart stores, auto clubs and High Country Harley Davidson.

Helping families in need at Christmas fits into the overall mission of The Salvation Army, started by founders William and Catherine Booth in 1865, Mistie explained while collecting toys.
and clothing at the Wal-Mart on Dell Range Blvd with local volunteers.

The Salvation Army is an evangelical part of the universal Christian Church, serving in more than 130 countries and helping 25 million Americans annually. Operations of The Salvation Army are supervised by trained officers like the Lambs, who are commissioned as lieutenants and ordained as ministers.

Lynn Gribble has been part of The Salvation Army church for more than 20 years. Volunteering for The Salvation Army is part of her Christian duty and brings her joy, she explained.

“People are so generous,” she added, noting the box filled with toys next to the table.

Later in November, the actual Christmas trees with gift tags are set up in front of the JCPenney store in the Frontier Mall and other participating locations in Cheyenne. Each tag lists clothing items, including sizes, as well as toys or other gifts, like bicycles.

The tags are not tied to specific kids’ requests, but are representative of popular gift ideas, along with appropriate sizes.

While some donors miss being able to give a specific child gifts, the change actually ensures that all children in the family receive gifts, Mistie explained. “In the past, not all the kids in the family had their tags chosen. We want to avoid that,” she said.

Donors still select a tag, buy the items, and bring the items unwrapped to The Salvation Army. The program requires gift donations to be unwrapped for safety reasons, and to allow the parents or guardians to shop.

Last year, donated gifts filled The Salvation Army’s main room and overflowed into the chapel. The extra cash donations also helped provide the families with Christmas dinner.

The donations were made in addition to the money raised by volunteer kettle bell ringers during the holidays. The Salvation Army relies on money raised in red kettles to fund about one-quarter of its budget, Chad said.

“The people of Laramie County are some of the most giving people who I’ve ever come across working with The Salvation Army, or even as a pastor for the last 27 or so years,” Chad said. “The generosity that the people of this community poured out was beyond expectation.”

The program assigns parents a personal shopper and gives them a large black plastic bag to shop. For each child enrolled in the program, the parents pick out four gifts, two to three sets of clothing and five stocking stuffers. The shopping day is scheduled for Dec. 20 this year.

“Shopping gives them the chance to really look and think through what their kids like and to just be involved,” Chad said.

Program participants include seasonal workers, grandparents caring for kids or parents who have lost a job. Chad points out that most Americans live paycheck to paycheck, regardless of their socioeconomic class.

In an effort to help in this area, the Lambs are offering a budgeting class in February, which will include helpful tips on how to budget for Christmas all year long. Angel Tree participants are only eligible to receive assistance every other year; however, if they choose to attend one of the scheduled February classes, they will be eligible for assistance in 2020.

The Lambs understand the difficulty of trying to buy gifts for everyone in the family, “especially when you don’t start until December,” Chad said. They have had six children, some of them adopted, living at home at one point.

“I would start the day after Christmas with sales and then put things away for the kids throughout the year,” Chad said. “Doing this ensures that all our kids had a nice Christmas and didn’t cost us a huge lump sum, putting us in debt.”

The Salvation Army has been turning its focus from handouts to working with clients to better support them in finding ways out of poverty, Chad explained.

Chad called the change of focus “phenomenal” for its impact on helping people change their lives. However, he quickly added that The Salvation Army still offers free lunch, a warm, safe place to stay during the day, and food boxes.

Chad and Mistie took over the local Salvation Army as pastors and corps officers in June 2018, but have been involved in The Salvation Army church since 2009. “We love the mission,” Chad said.

“We are raising our kids in the middle of seeing the faith in action, putting your feet to your words,” Chad said. “Our kids get involved in what we’re doing as far as services to the client.”
By Rachel Girt
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Forgoing stockings filled with toiletries, the COME (Cooperative Ministry for Emergency Assistance) House and Resource Center tries to make the holidays more about hope and the restoration of normalcy.

“We want to take the focus off of homelessness and treat them like a regular person. Stockings filled with toothpaste and a toothbrush are a reminder that they can't provide for their own most basic needs,” COME Executive Director Robin Bocanegra said.

COME opened its doors as a small emergency shelter in 1982. Today, it offers programs that help the homeless develop savings plans, maintain sobriety, receive mental health services or any other services that would contribute to self-sufficiency. The soup kitchen is open to everyone.

Although COME still offers a five-night stay in its emergency dorm, the shelter offers longer stays, up to six months, and services, geared toward encouraging residents to find employment and, if needed, treatment.

At first, COME offers up to five days in the emergency dorm and provides basic services. After the first five days, residents enter the Journey Program, working to achieve goals established by them and their caseworkers while being able to stay for over three months.

The next step is the Pay-to-Stay Program, where residents pay up to $250 a month to stay up to 120 days.

“This program is a really great opportunity for them to establish that budget and get used to paying their bills again,” Bocanegra said. “We feel like six months is kind of a magic number for stability.”

If six months is up but the residents need more time, they can apply for the Transitional Living Program and rent one of the 11 studio apartments upstairs for up to two years, Bocanegra said. This program helps residents struggling with mental/physical disabilities, substance abuse, recently released from prison or having other issues that make independent living difficult.

On any given night, COME could be home to 100 people – even families with children, Bocanegra said.

To make Christmas impactful, COME sets up the basement like a retail store, with a table filled with new, more personal gift items like cologne, watches, headphones, wallets or portable cellphone chargers. Each resident can pick one personal item and then can choose from donated clothing, coats and shoes.

An assigned escort helps the residents pick out colors and sizes according to their shopping list. There is a room to try on clothes, and another one filled with children's toys for the few families staying here.

Scott Coverdale, the kitchen/facility manager, and Bruce A. Mack prepare meals at the COME. The shelter offers longer stays through the Transitional Living Program. PHOTOS COURTESY COME
Last year was the first year COMEA tried offering a retail store experience versus selecting individual gifts for the more than 100 residents.

The residents liked shopping more than anything, she said. “They felt like they were actually going shopping, being able to select their own items. We’re going to try to do that again this year.”

While very grateful for all donations, Bocanegra recommends buying items for the personal gift table, not hygiene. “What might be nice is maybe a pair of warm gloves or a gift card to Starbucks just for coffee or a card that wishes them well,” she said.

To be safe, she suggested calling COMEA and asking what is needed before buying anything. “We want to make them feel more normal and maybe less homeless, even for one day.”

The holidays – really October to February – can be a really critical time, and that’s when some folks tend to relapse or have thoughts of suicide, Bocanegra said.

The COMEA staff has to be extremely aware and watch for subtle signals of clients reaching out to talk or for help. Bocanegra said caseworkers even check up on former residents who have a difficult time during the holidays. “People don’t want to open up and tell you their story or say, ‘Hey I’m thinking about killing myself. Would you help me?’ They’re going to be so secretive about it, but deep down they want someone to pull that out of them,” Bocanegra said.

COMEA always encourages residents, even after they’ve left, to come back to volunteer, visit or grab coffee with their former caseworker. “It’s not that they need stuff,” Bocanegra said. “They need community. They need people.”

Another way COMEA takes the focus off of homelessness is by removing exit dates starting Dec. 15. No one is asked to leave until after New Year’s Day, unless they’ve violated regulations.

For those staying at the shelter, COMEA offers an oasis in the desert, culminating access to needed resources in one place, said Bruce A. Mack. He added that the shelter acts as a hub for agencies that “would be difficult to find on your own.”

Mack has health issues and is currently homeless. He stays and works at the shelter, mostly in the kitchen, but is happy to help wherever he can, Mack said.

He stressed that many misconceptions about the homeless disappear after volunteering at COMEA and talking with the residents. “These are people. They’re not just poor, homeless, destitute or drug addicts.”

While there are a few who prefer to live homeless, most just got stuck, stranded, lost a job or have poor health, Mack said.

Maryjane Bandach stayed at COMEA twice. “I was here once before in 2010. I didn’t stay very long because I wasn’t ready to take the program seriously,” she said.

Five years later, after being released from prison, Bandach was ready, working her way through the programs. She eventually moved upstairs to transitional living, where she was able to obtain custody of her son.

Today, she manages the local Cricket store and regularly volunteers at COMEA. She even met her fiancé, Scott Coverdale, who is the kitchen/facility manager, here. “I love this place,” she said.

COMEA isn’t some dirty place where people who are too lazy to get a job or the bums of society hang out, Bandach said. “This place was my stepping stone to a
By Rachel Girt  
*For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle*

With two small children excitedly giggling on the sofa next to him, Airman First Class Demitrius Samora says he looks forward to more visits with Vicky Fry’s family.

The new Adopt an Airman program “gives airmen a family bond away from home,” Samora said, smiling while petting the Fry’s affectionate labradoodle.

Twenty-year-old Samora is from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he lived with his parents and two younger brothers before joining the Air Force in January 2019. He came to F.E. Warren Air Force Base to work in the Security Forces in July.

“This program is good for airmen like me who are trying to get used to being on their own on their first base,” Samora said.

The Military Affairs Committee (MAC) of the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce started the program this year as a way to provide a home-like setting and community support for first-term enlisted airmen. The program recently expanded to include first-time airmen who are married with or without children.

The role of the MAC is to help educate the community about the military and to support the troops, said MAC Chairman Andy Worshek.

“This program is something tangible that provides real troop support. It is a good fit with the Chamber.”

The idea stemmed from the prolific community response to the 2018 Valentine’s cookie drive for first-term airmen living in the dorms.

“Community members thanked us for giving them a way to give back and wanted to know what more they could do,” explained Carolyn Ritschard, who volunteered with the MAC at the time.

Ritschard proposed the idea for a voluntary Adopt an Airman program with leadership at F.E. Warren and the Chamber. After receiving approval by the base, Worshek appointed Ritschard as the chairwoman of the Adopt an Airman Committee. She has selected a committee composed of both community and military members to develop and maintain the program.

“Carolyn has put together an incredible team of volunteers, who meets for countless hours to put the processes and matches together,” Worshek said.

Col. Peter M. Bonetti, 90th Missile Wing commander, thanked the Cheyenne community for its unrivaled support for the airmen and the program.

“The holiday season can be a difficult time for some, especially for new airmen.

See A home for the Holidays, 18
Wheels for Charity

Annual program restores classic vehicles to raise funds for charity

By Rachel Girt
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Wanting to raise awareness and funds for local nonprofits, Midas of Cheyenne employees and several local businesses partner to turn ordinary vehicles into extraordinary eye-candy, all for a good cause.

Founded in 2013 by Midas co-owner Nick Dodgson, Wheels for Charity has raised more than $300,000 for local charities. The program customizes and restores vintage cars, raffles off the completed vehicles and gives all the funds raised to local nonprofits.

Dodgson calls himself more of the Wheels for Charity mascot and refuses to take credit for the program.

“Our team at Midas does most of the work, often volunteering their time,” he said. “They like to stay hidden, but they love to see the program’s success.”

In addition to Midas, businesses that have helped the program include Halladay Motors, NAPA Auto Parts, Tom the Tireman, Northern Colorado Driveline, Cheyenne Auto and Metal, and West Edge Collective.

“A common misconception is that we make money on the projects, but we don’t,” Dodgson said. “Even Halladay Motors donates the paint and bodywork. One hundred percent of the ticket sales go to the selected charities.”

Dodgson gives high praise to the team, which includes Bruce Mcallister, Chris Webster, Dan Przymus, Dominic Gleave, Trevor Gleave, Ronnie Ripley and Tyler Drew. Przymus’s wife, Debbie, did all the upholstery and embroidery on the Ford Coupe this year.

So far, the team’s projects have included a 1966 High Country Special Mustang, 1975 Pontiac Trans Am (what Dodgson jokingly refers to as the “Smokey and the Bandit” car), and a 1967 Kaiser Jeep M715, once used in the Army. The next project will be 1969 Chevy pickup, once owned by the original owner of Midas and donated by

See Wheels for Charity, 10
Wheels for Charity from 9

Dodgson said the vehicles veer more toward heavy customization than straight restorations.

“I like the idea of having old cars and modern drive trains, making them much more drivable,” he said.

Underneath the original steel body, the classic Coupe now has a fuel-injected V8 engine, custom chassis, new transmission, front suspension and disc brakes, and a rear axle with 4.10 gears.

Dodgson named this year’s project the Coupe in honor of the late rock disc jockey Steve “Coop” Cooper, who helped launch the Wheels for Charity program.

The Midas team, along with other local businesses, have spent more than 3,000 hours restoring the Coupe. The transformation took about two years.

Midas senior technician Chris Webster said spending his days off fixing the car is well worth it, and he feels a great sense of accomplishment.

“I believe in the causes that we do this for, especially supporting efforts against domestic violence,” he added.

Webster also came up with the entire design of the Coupe’s audio system, which includes a handmade box holding up the two rear speakers and subwoofers. Modernizing this classic with electric windows and such includes about three miles of wiring, Webster said.

“We were able to get more creative on this project,” Webster said. Extra flair on this bright purple Coupe includes tiny purple lights, providing an extra glow to its undercarriage, wheels and dash. Its headlights also glow a multitude of colors, including purple, all controlled by a phone app.

In addition to more than two years of work, Webster and Bruce McALLISTER, the master Midas technician, spent their time off for a solid month in the shop finalizing the details, particularly on the interior, before the big reveal.

Although there may be some stressful days, the project brings the Midas team together, Webster added. “We are a tight-knit work family.”

McALLISTER explained his involvement this way: “I like working on cars, and I like helping people even more.”

He can’t wait for the next project, the Chevy truck. Not wanting to reveal too many details, McALLISTER hinted that Midas’ plans include some radical changes appealing to car geeks. “It will be a tire burner with a lot of horsepower,” he added.

“This is kind of a dream job because we’re using the boss’ money to build, and the end result is charities getting the money,” McALLISTER said.

Once the build is complete, the vehicle is raffled off, and all proceeds from the raffle tickets are donated to three local nonprofits. This year’s nonprofits are Safehouse Services, Wyoming Business Advocates and K9s for Mobility.

Wheels for Charity has been a great opportunity to get out in the community and educate people about K9s 4 Mobility assistance dogs and how they make a difference in the lives of people who have a physical disability, said Michelle Woerner, CEO of K9s 4 Mobility.

All donations help K9s 4 Mobility train and place these specifically trained dogs with someone who wants to become more independent, she added.

Dale Steenbergen, president and CEO of the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce, called the program a success. “I am humbled by the Wheels for Charity project. Year after year, thousands of man hours are donated, hundreds of thousands of dollars are donated.
to wonderful causes in our community.”

The charities rotate every couple of years, and are chosen by the entire Midas team. The program has also helped Habitat for Humanity, Needs Inc., the Cheyenne Family YMCA, and programs at the Chamber like the Military Affairs Committee and the Wyoming Wranglers.

Safehouse will always be one of the recipients, because that is why Midas started this program. “One of my technicians tragically lost a stepdaughter to domestic violence back in 2013,” Dodgson explained. “Obviously, the whole store was deeply affected by this, and we wanted to raise awareness and funds.”

Through the previous vehicle raffles, Safehouse has received $88,000 that has been used for the shelter and the residents.

Safehouse is honored that Wheels for Charity has chosen it to be a recipient of this amazing fundraiser, said Carla Thurin, Safehouse Services executive director. “The care and compassion the Nick and his team has for our community shows in their creations. Buying a ticket not only gives someone a chance to cruise around in an awesome car, but they can be proud that they helped their neighbors.”

Dodgson came up with the idea for Wheels for Charity over lunch and a few beers with his friend, the late Steve Cooper, who worked as a DJ at KING-FM. They settled on raffling restored vehicles because “cars are the only thing we are good at,” he said, remembering their conversation.

The program is more about raising awareness than funds, Dodgson explained. “The vehicle is the eye-candy that starts the conversation with the nonprofit sitting behind the table. Hopefully, by the time the conversation ends, you are buying a $25 ticket to support their work. The chance of winning a cool car is second.”

The odds are good for winning, as up to 5,000 tickets can be sold per project. A retired Air Force officer won the Mustang, while the Trans Am is now in Arkansas, and the Kaiser went to a Douglas resident.

Dodgson credits Tim Joannides, owner of Halladay Motors, for instilling in him the importance of philanthropy and for being a valuable business mentor. Dodgson worked for Joannides for a short time, and stayed in contact with him when he left to work at another shop for five years.

“Tim give me confidence that I could do anything,” Dodgson said, offering to help him if he ever needed it.

When Dodgson’s wife, Brook, encouraged him to start a business, he reached out to Joannides for advice. “He helped me make sure that I didn’t get anything wrong. Very long story short, he had me write a business plan, which he kept redlining and throwing back at me to fix.”

Joannides also recommended that Dodgson join and be involved in the Chamber. “He said once you’re successful, you give back, and that has always stuck with me,” Dodgson said.

“Nick is a very good student,” Joannides said, noting that Dodgson has followed through on all his advice. “I’m very proud of what he and his family have accomplished.”

When Dodgson approached Halladay to help with Wheels of Charity, Joannides consulted with Jim Casey, the general manager. “We never hesitated and hope to help for years to come.”

The Dodgs bought their first Midas store in Cheyenne in January 2002. “We’ve been able to build it to one of the top stores in the nation with the incredible talent of our...
By Rachel Girt  
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Picking up the phone, Renee Gamino listened to the mother who was desperate to find food after their home lost electricity, spoiling all the food in the refrigerator.

Gamino, the coordinator for St. Joseph’s Food pantry, reassured the mother and invited her to pick up a bag of groceries at the pantry that day. “You need to bring an I.D. and something like a bill that shows your address in Cheyenne,” she said.

Whether they have lost a job or their Social Security check is not enough to survive on, most who walk into St. Joseph’s Food Pantry are in a financial crisis, not being able to afford to feed themselves or their family.

“When you are living on a limited income and a budget, losing all your perishable food is an emergency,” Gamino said, referencing the phone call. She noted that this family might only need help this month, while other recipients are more regular. The family had never received groceries from the pantry before.

Food is a basic necessity of life, Gamino said. “Most of us do not think twice about our weekly visits to a grocery store to provide for our families. We notice increased food costs, but we can adjust our family budget to still make ends meet. Unfortunately, that is not the case for many low-income/working poor families, seniors, veterans or the unemployed.”

St. Joseph’s Food Pantry steps in to help by providing a brown paper bag or box filled with enough nutritional groceries to help supplement families’ food for a week.

As of Oct. 30, St Joseph’s Food Pantry helped 829 low-income seniors, 1,354 low-income children, and 1,934 low-income veterans, retirees and unemployed adults. This is accomplished with the help of 65 volunteers, who pack and distribute groceries in the back of the pantry, and 20 volunteer drivers who give of their time every week.

The pantry offers much more than canned goods. This week, recipients had the option of picking from pears, lemons, pineapples or Brussels sprouts.

St. Joseph’s Catholic Church started a small food pantry more than 30 years ago as a commitment to assist those experiencing a shortage of food. At first, the pantry called the basement of the parish office home. As demand grew, the pantry moved to another building, taking over three classrooms, an office and the garage.

Jo-Ed Produce kept items needing refrigeration or freezing at no cost. Gamino added Jo-Ed continues to store the pantry’s excess of perishable items when needed.
With demand increasing, the pantry moved to a 5,000-square-foot warehouse, located near the church at 206 Van Lennep Ave., in 2016.

Gamino explained that there’s growing food insecurity in the community. “The individuals who have come through the door are facing financial dilemmas and need a reliable source of food.”

The food pantry is open from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Monday through Thursday. The pantry asks for a photo I.D. and proof of residency like a utility bill or rental agreement. When the recipient arrives, volunteers ask them to self-report about their household income and number of individuals.

“If there are individuals that are over the income guidelines, we’ll still provide them with food,” Gamino said. “A lot of times, it’s just to get back on their feet or help when things are tight.”

Pat Gallizzi is one of the more than 80 volunteers at the pantry. Today, he was filling bags in the warehouse, but he offered to do whatever is needed, from food pickups to volunteering in the front of the pantry.

“Everybody needs a little help from time to time, and this a great place for people to come if they need food,” Gallizzi said.

Gallizzi said volunteering at the pantry is very fulfilling. “Cheyenne is a very giving town,” he added.

“We couldn’t do this without the support of all our partners, businesses and individuals,” Gamino said.

Each month, two truckloads of food come from the Wyoming Food Bank of the Rockies, a food distribution program serving hunger-relief agencies. In 2016, the pantry bought or received at no cost 11,300 pounds of food.

The pantry also receives food donations from many local businesses, such as Bimbo’s Bread, Walmart on Dell Range, Panera Bread, Safeway, Natural Grocers, Coca Cola, Loaf and Jug, Starbucks, Town and Country Supermarket Liquors and Thrivent Financial. Even more churches, community groups and private individuals donate food and/or financial resources.

To help make Thanksgiving special, the pantry provided 450 Thanksgiving boxes through donations and help from Albertsons, Jo-Ed Produce, Wal-Mart, Knights of Columbus, Cheyenne Day of Giving, St.

Mary’s PTO, individuals and a recipient of the Spradley-Barr/KGWN Holiday Drive.

Gamino has found joy helping others as the part-time pantry coordinator.

“Our recipients are very considerate, wanting to make sure there is enough for everyone,” Gamino added. “If they don't need items, they take them out of the bag.”

Mary Jane Vyff and her husband have volunteered at the pantry for more than 14 years.

“I'm so touched when clients share their stories. Most often they tear up and thank us for being here,” she said.

**COMEa from 7**

The sight of elderly residents on oxygen, in wheelchairs or being incontinent is not unusual. More elderly who can’t take care of their own physical needs end up here, she added. “Many of whom belong in a nursing home, not a shelter.”

“Because we’re a homeless shelter, everyone just automatically assumes that we’ll take everyone, and we do,” Bocanegra said. COMEA tries to find the needed resources, but the staff do not have medical backgrounds, she added.

Like most nonprofits, funding is always an issue for COMEA. The 2018 annual operating budget was $630,000, the majority of which came from donations and rentals. The city of Cheyenne and Laramie County chip in $38,000 a year.

Last year, COMEA provided an estimated 35,000 bed nights at the shelter and served more than 47,000 meals. Bocanegra figures that the cost ends up being about $18 a night to shelter someone.

Coverdale stayed at the shelter for five months while homeless before finding a job and getting his own place and a truck. For a while, he worked at the Plains Hotel, but quit his job to work full-time at COMEA. Today, he serves as the kitchen and facility manager.

He admits that he could make more money working somewhere else. But Coverdale said helping Bocanegra and those staying at the shelter are important to him.

Coverdale is going to a culinary arts school in Boulder, Colorado, to get a degree. He wants to start teaching culinary skills to residents so they can find careers and escape homelessness.

“All I needed was a little boost,” Coverdale said. “COMEa helps lift you up and gives you that opportunity to save a little bit of money for your own place.”

“When you’re here, you are family,” Coverdale added.
Personal experience drives Cheyenne’s Riesland to aid those with disabilities

By Rachel Girt
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Serving on the Mayor’s Council for People with Disabilities (MCPD) has given Patti Riesland the mechanism to channel her passion for promoting accessibility for all people, regardless of their disability.

Accessibility is crucial to staying healthy, independent and self-sufficient, Riesland said. “I have a real passion for making sure that there are opportunities for people with disabilities or with age-related mobility, hearing and vision issues to be included in our community.”

Having accessibility issues strikes close to home for Riesland, who chairs the council.

Several years ago, a truck hit Riesland while she was crossing the street, causing a traumatic brain injury and vision issues. Since then, she has also been diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, an incurable eye disease, and a congenital, degenerative spinal condition where her spinal column slowly disintegrates.

Before the accident and medical diagnosis, Riesland lived a very active life, running from two to five miles a day. “I went from incredibly active to being in chronic pain,” she said.

“Prior to discovering my disabilities, I didn't understand the barriers faced by people with disabilities to function in everyday life,” she said. “I didn't know how difficult it was to get out of the vehicle in an accessible parking space when you’re a chronic pain. I didn't know how important it was to have an accessible restroom.”

Serving on the Mayor’s Council has given Riesland a way to give those with accessibility issues a voice in Cheyenne.

“Patti’s pursuit to make accessibility possible by personifying the people who are severely underrepresented is something to behold,” said Julie Tucker, who serves on the Mayor’s Council.

“Seeing her in action could make you tired,” Tucker added. “Since she took on the presidency, great strides have been made, and many projects are in the works. The city of Cheyenne is lucky to have her.”

Since grade school, Riesland has sought to help the financially and socially marginalized in her community. In addition to the Mayor’s Council, she has served...
in Rotary, Kiwanis, The People Project, Festival of the Trees, the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce and other community organizations. She also serves on the Church Council at Ascension Lutheran Church.

When growing up in Great Falls, Montana, she recalls her mother asking her to help an elderly neighbor, who was bedridden, with her meals. Riesland, who was in eighth grade, wasn’t thrilled with the idea of walking 10 blocks and making dinner twice a week for Ms. Kelly.

Riesland said she came to enjoy the time spent with Ms. Kelly, who was in her 80s and had lived a glamorous life. She helped her for about four years before Ms. Kelly required a higher level of care and went to an assisted living facility.

“That experience brought an awareness of people hidden behind closed doors who might need resources but don’t know who to ask,” she said. “That’s what started my passion for helping those vulnerable people in our communities.”

After graduating from the University of Montana and working for an upscale department store, she moved to Gillette with her husband, and they raised their family and became very active in community service.

“Wherever you go, there are people in need, and somebody has to stand up for them,” Riesland said. She became involved in helping with a food bank, soup kitchen, homeless shelter and community garden to help those with lower income levels.

When not volunteering, she coached her son’s soccer team, and was very involved with her daughter’s gymnastics and dance activities.

That changed with the accident in Montana. Riesland lost both her short- and long-term memory and had vision issues. “They thought that I would go blind,” she added.

Riesland moved to Austin, Texas, to attend a school for the blind and learn how to live blind. After six months, her memory hadn’t returned. “I had to learn to turn on a computer and took classes to learn how to go back to designing.”

She eventually returned to volunteering in Austin, helping at the Dream Center, a Christian transitional living facility helping men acclimate to life outside of prison. She became involved in producing news releases and working with local media.

After she completed her training, Riesland’s vision had not deteriorated to the extent predicted, and she could drive with an adaptive technology. She decided to move back to Wyoming to be closer to her children, who were in school.

“I love the people here in Cheyenne,” said Riesland, who dedicated her time in Cheyenne to working and volunteering with nonprofits.

Four years ago, then-Mayor Rick Kaysen appointed Riesland to the Mayor’s Council for People with Disabilities. She focused on helping better market the council and helping identify barriers to accessibility.

Riesland is very proud of her fellow council members’ work. She has no problem listing the merits of each member, as well crediting the city of Cheyenne for making a difference in the community.

“Anything that we do is not done in a vacuum,” Riesland said. “We actually work with all of the departments within the city.”

Riesland also attributes the city’s forward collaborative momentum to Mayor Marian Orr appointing Eric Fountain as her chief of staff and his work with the compliance division.

“We worked directly with him, and he’s been amazing,” Riesland said. “We’ve had lots of opportunities to be able to help various entities in the city to work together to make sure everything is compliant.”

One of the major hurdles for people with disabilities and people of all ages is transportation, she said. “We list transportation as anything from walking on a sidewalk to flying on an airplane.”

For example, whether using crutches, a cane or a wheelchair, having proper curb cuts downtown is essential for being able to maneuver, she said, adding that removing tripping hazards like lifting or cracking sidewalks is important.

City Council member Pete Laybourn, who is the liaison to the council, initiated a walk audit.

Members of the Mayor’s Council, the Downtown Development Authority and several city of Cheyenne departments walked a section of downtown, looking very carefully at the condition of the sidewalks.

“We were giving the city the evidence that was needed to be able to repair the sidewalks and curb,” she said.

Riesland is especially proud of the work of the council and city to address potential accessibility issues with the architects of the new airport. The council was able to advocate for more handicap accessible parking spaces and improvements to the restrooms.

At one point, the airport facilities manager taped out what a restroom would look like, she said. The council provided people in wheelchairs with service animals and even some maneuvering as a blind person to show that the accessible bathroom was too narrow.

The council also is helping with the new Municipal Court building’s restrooms, the Friendship Playground at Cahill Park, improving ordinances and legislation about service animals, and countless other accessibility improvements in the community.

“I think that people with disability or mobility issues are some of the bravest people who I have met,” Riesland stressed. “We need to be aware of what it takes for that person to get their groceries, leave their house, work, volunteer, go to church or have coffee with a friend. They’re extraordinary people.”
Doug and Susan Samuelson

Using lessons learned in childhood to better their community

Doug and Susan Samuelson, pictured at Cape Town, South Africa, have been dedicated to improve the lives of others and be good global citizens.

PHOTO COURTESY SAMUELSONS

By Rachel Girt
For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Doug and Susan Samuelson have dedicated their lives to working hard and helping others, very quietly and without any fanfare.

Susan credits their similar upbringing. “Giving back is just what we were taught to do. We’ve had a few lucky breaks along the way and can give back,” she said. Others have recognized the Samuelsons’ efforts to improve the lives of those living in Wyoming. Susan received the 2018 Women of Influence Lifetime Achievement Award. Also, in 2018, the couple received the Spirit of Philanthropy Award at the Wyoming Nonprofit Conference.

The couple has touched many hearts and organizations through the years. They have helped the University of Wyoming, Laramie County Community College, Laramie County Library, the Paul Smith Children’s Garden at the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens, Boys and Girls Club, Meals on Wheels, Climb Wyoming, COMEA House, Wyoming Community Foundation, Wyoming Women’s Foundation, and Wyoming Women’s Antelope Hunt, just to name a few.

“Susan serves as a board member for the Wyoming Community Foundation with a true heart for the programs we grant to,” said Craig Showalter, CEO of the Wyoming Community Foundation.
“She and Doug have also been instrumental in the success of the Wyoming Women’s Antelope Hunt. Their commitment to Wyoming is inspiring and exceptional.”

Both Susan and Doug came from hardworking families with five children. Their fathers served in World War II and started companies upon their return.

“Doug’s dad started a painting company in Riverton, and my dad came home and started a construction company in Casper,” Susan said.

Both of their fathers also believed in public service. “Doug’s dad was on the school board in Riverton, and my dad was the head of the airport board. My poor mother was a volunteer for everything,” she said.

While her family didn’t have a ton of money while growing up, her parents helped others, Susan said. Her mother would tell them, “Well, it’s not if you’re going to volunteer. It’s where you’re going to volunteer.”

Her mother was always giving the children’s stuff away to those in need, including Susan’s prom dresses. “Honestly, I never graduated from high school with leftover prom dresses in my closet. My mom asked me to give them away.”

Growing up during the Great Depression influenced their parents. “My dad was like, ‘You make money in Wyoming, by God, you better give it back to Wyoming,’” Susan said.

When she graduated from the University of Wyoming with her teaching degree, Susan made $10,000 a year, but she still would give $25 to United Way. Doug did, too, she said.

Teaching for more than 24 years in Cheyenne, Susan loved working with children. She taught at Carey Junior High School and Lebhart and Fairview elementary schools.

After the family sold their interest in the Jonah Field, the Samuelsons bought Warren Livestock Company, a ranch in southeast Wyoming, just north of Cheyenne. After her retirement, she focused on her family, ranching and volunteering.

Francis E. Warren, the first governor of Wyoming and senator to represent the state in Congress, incorporated the centennial ranch. Today, the Samuelsons run sheep and cattle operations there.

Ranch work keeps them busy. “I do whatever is needed. Buy groceries, walk sheep and wash floors,” she added.

Caring for and valuing their employees is another attribute passed down by their parents, Susan said. “You work with your employees, not boss them around. If a floor needs scrubbed, I’ll scrub it, not order someone to do it. That’s how you earn their respect.”

They have become close to those who work for them. “We have many meals together and keep any eye collectively on all the children,” she added.

When not ranching, the couple’s volunteer efforts have been quite diverse. Doug served nine years as a representative in the Wyoming Legislature and on the University of Wyoming Foundation Board. Susan volunteered at the Boys and Girls Club and Meals on Wheels, as well as serving on the board of the Wyoming Community Foundation.

Doug, a wildlife biologist, recently spent time working on conversation issues in Africa with Ivan Carter Wildlife Conservation Alliance. He has traveled to Mozambique’s Zambeze Delta to participate in the reintroduction of lions as part of anti-poaching efforts. The project partnered with the Cabela Family Foundation to introduce 24 lions to the area in June 2018. The lions now have more than 30 cubs.

Susan emphasizes the importance of going beyond financial help. She said, “Our parents had expectations of us to be good citizens of the world. They modeled it all the time.”

“You help people, if you can, not just financially,” Susan said. “You need to be available for people and talk to them.”

She flipped over her phone to show a prominent “MM” sticker on its back. The sticker helps her remember her brother, Mick McMurry, who died in 2015, how he lived his life and the importance of reaching out to people in need, she said.

“My brother Micky was gentle, kind and giving. That’s just how you should live,” she said.
A home for the holidays from 8
spending their first holiday season away from home,” Bonetti added. “This program offers our airmen an additional support foundation and home away from home. We believe this opportunity can be mutually beneficial for the gracious families doing the adopting, since they will get to learn all about our mission here at F.E. Warren.”

Ritschard personally knows how having a tight-knit community is key to the health and well-being of those serving in the Air Force. Her husband, Col. Hans Ritschard, recently retired after serving in the Air Force since 1993. Moving from base to base, the couple was stationed all around the world.

Imagine being single, a newlywed or a family on your first base in a new community without a support network, Ritschard said. “This program provides a mechanism for these young airmen to develop supportive friendships with people in the community.”

The Adopt an Airman program bridges that gap through an application process where both the airmen and prospective adoptive families list what kinds of activities they enjoy, such as being outdoors to wanting a mentor. The Adopt an Airman Committee attempts to match people based on shared interests.

“We’re very conscientious about making sure we’re matching people with like interests,” Ritschard said. “We also don’t dictate how the relationship develops or how often they see each other. We encourage people to incorporate the airmen into what they’re already doing as a family.”

Ritschard stressed that the program is voluntary. If the match doesn’t work for either side, the committee pairs them with someone else, she explained.

Vicky and Matt Fry are among the more than 20 local families either paired with or in the process of being paired with first-term enlisted airmen between the ages of 18 and 25.

Matched in September, Samora and the Fry family have a shared passion for the Denver Broncos, animals and the outdoors. Vicky Fry explained the family wanted to make a difference in an airman’s life.

“We thought what it would be like if our son or daughter joined the military, was far away from home, and how we would want them to be welcomed into the community,” Fry said.

They also wanted to teach their children not to fear the military, Fry added. This summer, their 3-year-old son, Everett, saw a helicopter fly overhead and was worried it was bad guys.

“After that, we looked for ways for him to meet airmen in the community and realize they are the good guys who help protect our country,” Fry said.

Fry says the kids have gotten a real kick out of the experience so far. “They had talked about Demitrius all the time, even before we met him, and what they wanted to do with him.”

Plans are in the works for future hunting trips, swimming with the kids at the Cheyenne Aquatic Center, and Ainsely wants to read to him tonight, Fry said.

Overhearing her mother talk about future plans, 6-year-old Ainsley squeals about the possibility of reading books to her new friend. The excitement permeates the Fry living room, with her brother Everett rambling over to be near Samora.

Samora laughs, saying the atmosphere reminds him of home with his brothers.

CMSgt Tiffany R. Bettisworth, 90th Missile Wing command chief, said, “Being a brand new airman stationed at a base far from home can be difficult, but programs like this can make a world of difference.”

Bettisworth added, “Personally, I am so proud to be a part of such a great community that offers so much support to our men and women here at the 90th Missile Wing. It warms my heart to see the people of Cheyenne rally around such a great cause. We really appreciate it.”

To apply as a sponsor family or an airman, email adoptanairmanwyo@gmail.com.

Wheels for Charity from 11
employees,” Dodgson said.

Since then, the Dodgsons have added two Midas stores in Colorado, an oil change shop on Dell Range Blvd and Cheyenne Motorsports to their businesses. Along the way, they have been supportive of many local charities, even beyond the Wheels for Charity program.

While serving as board chairman for the Chamber, Dodgson was named the 2017 Businessperson of the Year by the Cheyenne Board of Realtors.

That is a long way from Dodgson’s roots, a U.S. citizen born here, but who grew up mostly in England. He returned to the U.S. in 1992 after his first business failed when he was in his early 20s. “I was a complete and utter disaster,” he said, laughing.

Dodgson left England with a suitcase and just $1,000 to his name. He stayed with his godmother in Maryland and worked at a Honda dealer.

He ended up in Cheyenne in September 1992, seeking adventure and a new career in aircraft maintenance at Cheyenne Aero Tech. While waiting for a helicopter repair job in Guam, Dodgson started working at a small insurance agency in town.

Dodgson fell in love with Brook, who worked at the agency, married her and never left Cheyenne. “I have an amazing life. I have an amazing team surrounding me, and Brook is a huge part of all this.”
HAPPY Holidays

Wishing you and yours a cheerful holiday season.

Wyoming Tribune Eagle
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