



Ruby's Pantry and local church partner to bless the community this Christmas

BY MIKE TOFT
St. Charles Press
Lewiston Journal Editor

Ruby's Pantry St. Charles and The St. Charles United Methodist Church—affectionately known as The Little Church that Could—continued their mission of service this Christmas season, distributing food and financial support to families and organizations across the region.

Since launching in May 2023, Ruby's Pantry St. Charles has provided thousands of pounds of food to hundreds of households each month with the help of dedicated community volunteers. The model is simple: guests donate \$25 per food share or bundle, with no income or residency

requirements. "Anyone who eats qualifies," organizers emphasize.

Ruby's Heart trucks collect overages, surpluses, and bumper crops from hundreds of companies, which are then sorted and delivered by semi to the St. Charles site. The Pop-Up Pantry operates on the second Thursday of each month at Brookwood Park, located at 272 West 1st Street. Guests drive through, make their donation, and volunteers load the food bundles directly into their vehicles.

For each share distributed, the St. Charles United Methodist Church receives \$2.50, which is reinvested into local missions, including emergency assistance for families and support for community

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Photo By Mike Toft

Representatives from local organizations gather as St. Charles United Methodist Church—known as The Little Church that Could—partners with Ruby's Pantry to bless the community with both food and financial support this Christmas. From left: David Hinckley (site coordinator), John Steffel (Food for Families), Jill Veerkamp (St. Charles Library), Rachel Russell and Dave Fruth (St. Charles Ambulance), Jared Butson (St. Charles Public School), and Mr. and Mrs. Arnold representing Emma Norton and Ruby's Heart.

An assortment of life's moments in 2025

As we stand on the threshold of a new year and reflect on the past, 2025 was another busy, fast-moving year for our beloved community, filled with memories—some splendid and others not-so-great—that illustrate the very essence of life in southeast Minnesota.

The pulse of our region quickened with significant events that defined our lives and shaped our social fabric. Local businesses embraced the winds of change, adjusting to both the opportunity and challenge of the evolving economic landscape. Innovations bloomed alongside difficulties, as we welcomed remarkable startups and saw longstanding family operations find ways to integrate modern practices. The excitement at the farmer's market was palpable, from fresh produce to handmade crafts; it was a celebration of our vibrant entrepreneurial spirit.

Thanks for reading the St. Charles Press/Lewiston Journal and supporting your local small town newspaper. Happy New Year!

January 2025

St. Charles Staff Part of Bluff Country Hidden Heroes

On a snowy, cold December 19, emergency staff from St. Charles joined like-heroes from Fillmore, Houston, and Winona counties to deliver presents in St. Charles, Lewiston, Hokah, La Crescent, Dakota, Nodine, Wilson, Brownsville, Rushford, Mabel, Spring Grove, Winona, Eitzen, Caledonia, and Houston.

They call themselves the Bluff Country Hidden Heroes. Delivering Christmas presents is now an annual event that started seven years ago. This event is a wonderful opportunity for law enforcement and first responders to work in the communities they serve.

Enjoy Hot Reads for Cold Nights at the St. Charles Public Library

On January 2, the St. Charles Public Library will kick off its annual Hot Reads for Cold Nights winter reading program. Geared to both adults and teens, the winter reading program challenges people to both read and visit the library in the cold winter

season.

Over the next three months, readers will have two different opportunities to win prizes. First, for every three books read, people will be able to enter a monthly prize drawing.

Lewiston City Council approves 2025 9.6% levy increase

The regular Lewiston City Council meeting commenced at 6:00 PM on Thursday, December 26, 2024.

Councilman Beck, Eggert, Borchardt, Potter and Mayor Carlson were all in attendance at the meeting.

During the public hearing session of the council meeting, the council discussed

the new implementation of body cameras within the police department. It was decided to allocate funds for an annual lease, with a five-year payment plan in place and efforts being made to secure additional funding.

Lewiston City Council appoints members to committees

The Lewiston City Council conducted their regular city council meeting on January 8, 2025. In attendance were Councilman Beck, Eggert, Good, Potter, and Mayor Carlson.

A motion was proposed by Potter and seconded by Eggert to adopt the agenda. The motion was unanimously



Photos Submitted

The gathering always draws a nice crowd.

ly approved by all council members.

St. Charles School Board Hears from Sievers Creative

The St. Charles Public Schools meeting took place on January 13, 2025, during which the agenda was approved without any public comments.

Peter Snyder initiated the discussion regarding the payment of bills totaling \$595,165.97. Following a brief review, no inquiries were raised, and the payment was subsequently ap-

proved. The consent agenda was approved as presented, demonstrating unanimous agreement among the members.

Sievers Creative was present at the meeting to present their offerings to the St. Charles School District. Superintendent Robert Routh stated, "Our objective is to provide you with an educational presentation this month, and if the board con-

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Winter storm slams Southeast Minnesota with blizzard conditions, whiteouts

A powerful winter storm swept across the region Sunday, December 28, 2025, bringing a rapid transition from rain to heavy snow, dangerous travel conditions, and widespread whiteouts west of the Mississippi River.

Moderate to heavy snow developed from west to east through the morning hours. What began as rain quickly changed to snow across much of southeast Minnesota, coating roadways and creating slick, hazardous conditions—particularly west of the Mississippi River, where numerous crashes were reported as visibility deteriorated.

By early afternoon, conditions worsened significantly. Strong northwest winds gusting between 35 and 45 mph, combined with failing and blowing snow, produced extensive drifting and new zero visibility. Blizzard conditions were reported in multiple communities west of the river as plows struggled to keep up with rapidly changing road surfaces.



Photo by Mike Toft

Main Street businesses in St. Charles dig out as blizzard-like winds begin to pick up again Monday morning.

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Winona County's outstanding conservationists named Southeast Area 7 Winner

BY MIKE TOFT
St. Charles Press
Lewiston Journal Editor

Winona County landowners Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun have been named the Minnesota Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists, a regional honor recognizing their long-term commitment to protecting soil, water, wildlife, and natural resources along Trout Run Creek near St. Charles.

The pair were first selected as the 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationists by the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). Their leadership in conservation was later recognized at the state level when the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) named them the Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists, an award presented during the MASWCD annual convention in December 2025.

Area 7 encompasses 11 counties across southeastern Minnesota: Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue,



Photo Submitted

Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun stand near Trout Run with their 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationist sign, recognizing their ongoing commitment to soil, water, and wildlife conservation.

Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, and Winona.

Bender and Ramthun's property features a diverse

mix of prairie, woodland, cropland, and a cold-water trout stream. Their

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Local News

Winona County's outstanding conservationists named Southeast Area 7 Winner

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management approach emphasizes long-term ecological health, habitat diversity, and water quality protection.

Since purchasing the land, they have worked closely with the Winona County SWCD, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Trout Unlimited, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the conservation partners. Together, they have implemented projects that reduce erosion, improve stream function, and enhance wildlife habitat throughout the Root River watershed.

One of the most significant efforts on the property is a one-mile steamboat restoration along Trout Run, a two-mile cold-water trout stream. Before restoration, severe erosion had carved deeply incised banks, sending sediment downstream during heavy rain events.

Through a multi-agency collaboration, the streambanks were stabilized, invasive vegetation was removed, and in-stream habitat structures—such as root wads, tree trunks, and boulders—were installed to support trout at all life stages. The project removed tons of sediment, reduced phosphorus runoff, and helped secure the long-term health of the stream.

Bender and Ramthun also tackled erosion on vulnerable cropland by enrolling acres into the Conservation

Reserve Program (CRP) with assistance from the Winona County SWCD. Formerly planted in continuous row crops, these fields were converted to a diverse native prairie designed to improve infiltration and stabilize soils.

When heavy rains created gullies during prairie establishment, the landowners worked with SWCD and NRCS staff to adaptively manage the site. Grassed waterways and grade-stabilization were added to further reduce sediment loss and protect Trout Run.

Since 2011, the pair have partnered with foresters to assess woodland health, control invasive species, and strengthen forest resilience. Beginning in 2020, they undertook systematic treatment of buckhorn, garlic mustard, wild parsnip, honeysuckle, bull thistle, and black locust.

Their ongoing participation in the Winona County SWCD annual tree sale has supported reforestation of storm-damaged areas and increased species diversity. Recent plantings include tamarack seedlings in wetland areas along the stream.

Native prairie, pollinator gardens, and restored woodland habitat now support a wide range of wildlife. Trail cameras regularly capture deer, eagles, hawks, foxes, coyotes, and other species benefiting from the improved landscape.

Bender and Ramthun's conservation ethic extends beyond their own property. In June 2024, they partnered with Winona County SWCD and the Basin Alliance for the Lower Mississippi in Minnesota (BALMM) to host a Trout Stream Field Day, drawing landowners, agency staff, and community members to learn about conservation programs, karst geology, and stream restoration.

They also collaborated with NRCS on an educational video, "Trout Stream Restoration Southeastern Minnesota," filmed on their property and available on the Winona County SWCD website (winonaswcd.org). The video highlights best practices for erosion control and habitat enhancement.

Bender and Ramthun were selected as the 2023 Outstanding Conservationists for the MN Southeast Area 7 for their proactive approach, willingness to learn, and dedication to maintaining conservation practices over time. Their strong partnerships with local and state organizations continue to protect water quality, support wildlife habitat, and strengthen conservation efforts across Winona County.

Their work, local officials say, stands as a model for how private land stewardship can benefit entire watersheds—and future generations.



Photos Submitted

Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun receive the Minnesota Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists award during the MASWCD Convention on December 3, 2025. From left: MASWCD President Charles Rau, Sue Ramthun, Claire Bender, and The Farmer magazine editor Kevin Schulz.



Collage of photos shared by Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun highlights key moments from their long-term conservation work along Trout Run Creek.

Year in Review

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curs, we will include in the action."

St. Charles Catholic Daughters' 500 Card Parties a Hit in the Winter

Every year, starting on the third Sunday in January, the St. Charles Senior Center hosts a lively game of "500", sponsored by the Court St. Charles Catholic Daughters of the Americas. The event takes place from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. for six consecutive weeks, and all are welcome to attend.

Upon payment of a \$6.00 fee, participants receive a name tag and are seated at designated tables. This gathering provides a wonderful opportunity to socialize, meet new people, and enjoy a delicious luncheon. Cash prizes are awarded to the top three scorers, with \$5 going

to the first-place winner, \$3 to the second-place winner, and \$2 to the third-place winner. Additionally, there are numerous door prizes up for grabs.

The St. Charles Public Library Presents "Minnesota's Hooded History"

On Thursday, January 30 at 6pm, local historian and librarian Nancy Vaillancourt will visit the St. Charles Public Library to share her research on the history of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Minnesota.

Vaillancourt has spent years investigating the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in southeastern Minnesota. Although not common knowledge today, the Klan was incredibly active and highly visible throughout the state during the 1920s, with a presence in large cities and small towns, alike.



Photo Submitted

The Garage was the venue for this year's Winter Blast.

February 2025 St. Charles School Board welcomes new member following recent resignation

In a decisive move to fill a vacancy left by former school board member Travis Gransee, the St. Charles School board convened a special meeting on January 29. Gransee's unexpected resignation, which occurred with two years remaining in his term, prompted board members to initiate a formal process for selecting a successor.

New Talent Graces City of Lewiston

The City of Lewiston is welcoming a fresh face to its administrative leadership as Ragini Varma steps into the role of City Administrator.

Her first official day on staff was January 13, 2025.

Varma, who brings over 24 years of experience in both public and private sectors, previously served the City of North Branch, Minnesota for eight years.

Free Community Meal brings neighbors together in Utica

In a heartwarming display of community spirit, the Lewiston Church of the Brethren hosted a free community meal at the Utica School/

Community Center on Sunday, February 9, coinciding with the Supper Bowl festivities.

Attendees delighted in a generous menu featuring pizza, salad, fresh fruit, and dessert cheesecake.

Hernandez takes home first at St. Charles's 6th Grade Spelling Bee

The St. Charles Elementary was buzzing with anticipation this week as the 6th grade held its annual spelling bee. After a challenging competition filled with tricky words and nail-biting moments, Daniel Hernandez emerged victorious, claiming the coveted title of Spelling Bee Champion.

In the end, it was Daniel Hernandez who correctly spelling the championship-winning word, securing his first-place victory.

Lewiston-Altura Celebrates Snoball week 2025

The Lewiston-Altura community gathered in celebration as the 2025 Snoball Royalty was announced, marking a cherished tradition that highlights student involvement and school spirit. This year's event showcased the talents and charisma of students across

sophomore, junior, and senior classes.

March 2025 OMC - Plainview celebrates retirement of Alane Booth, PA-C

Olmsted Medical Center (OMC) is proud to recognize the distinguished career of Alane Booth, PA-C, who is retiring after more than 20 years of dedicated service to the Plainview community.

Ms. Booth has been a trusted provider and advo-

simplicity and compassion. She has built deep-rooted relationships with patients, many of whom consider her an important part of their lives.

Eagle Scout Court of Honor in Recognition of Erik Voss

On Sunday, March 9, 2025, the Faith Lutheran Church in St. Charles, MN, played host to a memorable Eagle Scout ceremony, honoring Erik Voss. The event, attended by family, friends, and com-



Photos by Richard Johnson

Alane Booth, PA-C at Olmsted Medical Center in Plainview, is pictured with co-workers during a retirement celebration on Feb. 27. She is third from right in the front row. Booth retired after more than 20 years of service to Plainview.

cate for her patients, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of countless individuals and families.

A Legacy of Patient-Centered Care

Ms. Booth has been an integral part of OMC's vision to provide patient-centered, community-focused health-care. Her dedication to family medicine has shaped the wellbeing of many, providing comprehensive care with

community members, celebrated Erik's remarkable journey to achieving the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout.

New direction for waste services in St. Charles

The St. Charles City Council met for their regular meeting on March 11, 2025, with all board members present.

The council unanimously accepted the consent agenda, and the agenda present-

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Photo Submitted

Congratulations to Zach Plank on achieving his 100th win at sections last week

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