

## PRODUCE

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explained her intricate setup and how she often gets certain vegetables sooner because of her specially equipped greenhouse. Her deep winter tunnel, burns national gas to keep things nice and warm over the winter. This allows her to plant tomatoes and cucumbers early and harvest them

earlier in the season. The availability of tomatoes and cucumbers so early makes her stand quite popular. Additionally she grows lettuce, spinach, kale, cabbage, pumpkins and a variety of flowers. Venis works with students regularly throughout the year in preparation for the stand. Students during free hour or independent study come out and help Venis plant, weed, and tend to the many planters in the greenhouses. Venis

uses her plants as device for community and student interaction. Outside of her high tunnel greenhouse is a special plot for pumpkins. Venis plans to grow huge competition pumpkins. These pumpkins are a fun assignment for students, in the fall when they are removed from the ground, students will have the chance to guess their size. Another special project involves cabbage plants. Venis will give the plants

to some younger students with them being responsible for their care. Watering and tending to them will be entirely their job. In the summer the students are instructed to send a photo to Venis and she will select the best one to be entered into a drawing for \$1,000. Venis also helps with summer recreation activities. With many people choosing athletics, some are drawn to the dirt and turf. Summer recreational students are given free

reign to grow whatever they want. They utilize large planters just a few feet away from the greenhouses. Venis is at the ready to impart her gardening knowledge on the aspiring gardeners. Venis has a busy month ahead of her. Business is somewhat frantic in June and she often sells out of produce within a couple hours. Customers should come early to get their pick of freshly harvested vegetables.

## PIERCE

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While he didn't continue the farming tradition, his work ethic and desire to always be doing something was apparent as he began to build his business and to pour himself into the community. Pierce recalls going door-to-door in those early years, making cold calls and getting to know every dairy farmer in the area. Back then, they were everywhere. The agency became known for the fact that they are an independent insurance agency that sought to create relationships with their customers. It's something the business still holds firm to. Erin still hears about those relationships from the kids of the parents that did business with the agency. Many of those kids are now clients and recall a special treat on their birthday, a card and stick of gum for everyone under age 10. "I meet people to this day that

are 50,60 years old that say 'oh when I was little it was my birthday, I'd go to the mailbox, you could just smell the gum, you knew it was in there,'" Erin Pierce recalls. "They were so excited to get that gum and they were also sad when they turned 11 and they no longer got gum." Eventually Toby grew the business to where he earned clients through reputation and the business still totes his name because of that reputation. The 60 years of business was celebrated with a community lunch and supper from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on June 6. It was not a retirement party. But a beautiful day brought great crowds to share in the celebration. "He's not retiring," Erin said, emphasizing that Toby doesn't like to hear about retirement. She shared that while she feels she's slowing down, she feels her dad is speeding up. While he is semi-retired, he still comes in daily to share his vast knowledge.

"Most people are smart enough to get out before 60 years, I didn't figure that out in time," Toby said. Toby's been on the Wadena city council, Elks, Lions, community center board, Jaycees and more. He said he started the park board and was instrumental in getting a community center and a sledding hill in town. "I think I helped Wadena," Toby said of his service to Wadena while being a husband, father, referee and business owner. He still serves on Rising Phoenix and Wadena HRA boards. And because he's spent time in public office, and has had his fair share of criticism, he takes advantage of opportunities to light a fire under certain members of the community in an effort to keep his community looking good. He's been known to prune branches of trees throughout the city in order to maintain the looks of Wadena. It's clear he has a passion to see the community flourish and he feels that Wadena is setting up for

a great future. Toby doesn't share his age, but he does state on the record that he started his business when he was 5. He managed to graduate from high school, attend college at the University of Minnesota, join the Army and get married in those extensive five years. His wife, Jeanette, passed away in 2012 from Parkinson's disease. Erin said her mother was the rock in the family. Erin and Toby both shared how much they missed having her in their lives. While Erin owns the business and serves as the health insurance specialist, she is joined by Katie Uselman, who has worked with the agency since 2008 and currently serves as commercial and personal lines specialist. Also holding the office together is Brittany Evans, Health Insurance Specialist and Personal Lines Specialist. Michael Johnson, Wadena Pioneer Journal editor, can be reached at [mjohnson@wadenapj.com](mailto:mjohnson@wadenapj.com) or 218-631-2561.

## BODY

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apparently deceased. After calling in the report, the Wadena Police Department responded finding the man dead and called in the Wadena County Sheriff's Office death investigator. The body was sent to the Midwest Medical Examiner's Office for an autopsy. "No foul play is suspected at this time," according to a news release from Chief of Police Naomi Plautz. Plautz said through some investigation into the man, they were able to identify him as someone recently residing in the area, but not a local resident. Based on the information they had about where the deceased male last was, she said it led them to believe this was not foul play. She would not say where he last was. More information is expected after the family is notified and an autopsy is complete. As of Tuesday, June 11, the toxicology report was not yet available from the medical examiner. Plautz said the man's identity will be released once that report was shared. Fair board members planned to continue with events on Sunday, utilizing a different entry, but heavy rainfall led the enduro event to be postponed. Lehmann said the booth has not been used since last October. It's unclear how long the man was in the booth, but based on knowledge of the man's whereabouts, it's not likely he was there long. Some in the community questioned whether this instance was related to another call for service from Thursday morning, where a woman called a friend, apparently intoxicated, saying that she had killed someone and "put the body out in the county." Plautz said that there is no connection between the incidents. Wadena County Sheriff Mike Carr Jr., agreed, saying that followup with that incident involving an intoxicated female led the sheriff's office to information the person involved was making false claims and was not in the area when they claimed they were. Michael Johnson, Wadena Pioneer Journal editor, can be reached at [mjohnson@wadenapj.com](mailto:mjohnson@wadenapj.com) or 218-631-2561.

## BAKERY

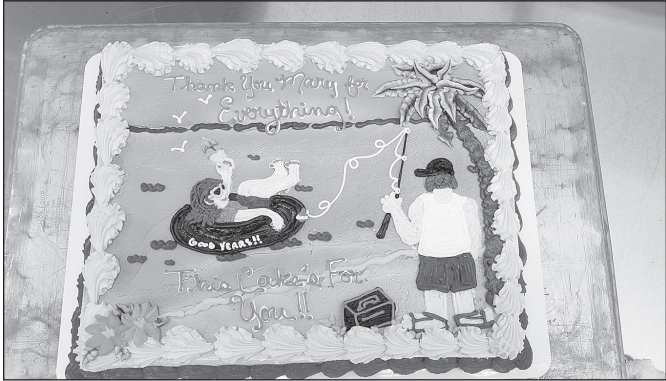
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had to happen. The only trucks that needed to be worked on in that building were those that needed assembling out of frosting on top of a large sheet cake for someone's birthday. Speaking of cake decorating, the first place cake decorating started was in what is now a janitorial room. Cake decorating, Mary's specialty, is now done in a huge room with space for a dozen decorators if the need should arise. Both Mary and Dave marveled at the changes that have come to the facility that have helped them grow to the point where they now serve six states with well over a hundred types of donuts, breads, cakes, pies, buns, cookies and more goodies than a church basement potluck. What was once done by six employees is now 42. What was once trucked to five stores is now over 380. The facility grew with three more additions during their time. The size of equipment grew, too. When they make buns, we're talking pallets of flour. When they mix up a batch, it's a 300-pound pile of dough that can make 200 dozen hot dog buns. They started with three ovens but now 8-10 ovens are almost constantly baking, sending a tantalizing aroma into the streets of northeast Wadena. Mary said many people tell her they like the idea of being able to bake for a living, but seeing the scale of baked goods done each day at Abby's is not like rolling out some dough on the kitchen counter. It takes an army to fulfill the many orders going out six days a week. "This isn't your kitchen table," Mary said. But what it is is a company that the Schmidt's are very



Michael Johnson / Pioneer Journal

Donuts ready to be fried at Abby's Bakery in Wadena.



Submitted photo

How appropriate for a cake decorator to go home with a cake on her day of retirement. Her co-workers put together a fine going away treat after 24 years on the job at Abby's Bakery.

proud of. "I think Wadena can be very proud of the fact that they have a company like Mason Brothers and Abby's that employ so many people," Dave said. "We need more companies like this one in Wadena," Mary added. Human Resources director Roland Gilbert appreciated all the work the two put into making the company what it is. "Their loyalty and dedication is second to none," Gilbert said. "They put in a lot of years and a lot of hours to make sure that Abby's is what it is today."

Dave was known for keeping people on task in the bakery. One of his words of wisdom was, "if you can't talk and work, don't talk." Now the two can talk all they want in retirement, leaving the work to those remaining.

### Retirement

Mary plans to spend more time with her grandchildren upon exiting the bakery scene, maybe even baking with them. She's also quite excited about an upcoming trip to Australia. While Mary worked 24 years to build the bakery

into what it is today, she said the business is in very good hands. Many of the employees are family members of the two, boasting over 150 years of baking experience among the family. "That's probably what held it together at first," Dave said of the family experience in baking. Four of the six were family from day one and many family members remain except for Dave, Mary and Dave's brother Dan, who passed away in 2016. Mary's sisters said they might be knocking on the door of retirement soon too. That family of bakers, decorators, packagers and more shared laughs, tears, hugs and confectionaries as they wished Mary well on her retirement. She and Dave toured the factory one last time before the retirement was official and

### Family business

Since 1995, The Schmidt family members have a combined grand total of 150+ years of dedication to Mason Brothers & Abby's Bakery. They include: Dave Schmidt, Mary Schmidt, Bev Lorentz, Diane Turner, Danny Schmidt, Jacob Schmidt, Virginia Heldt, Ben Heldt, Amber Heldt, Lisa Brown, Debbie Hess, Val Schmidt, Carrie Lorentz and Dustin Anderson.

reflected on the rise of the bakery and wishing others well. Leaving behind a lifetime of work was not easy for everyone as Mary's sisters Diane Turner and Bev Lorentz shared how much they would miss having her around as they continue to work in the baking area. Hugs and tears were shared in the hours before Mary was off on her way. While the family worked together, Mary said at work they were workers, not family. Even so, the family bond, like the ingredients going into each bakery item at Abby's, is clearly strong. Michael Johnson, Wadena Pioneer Journal editor, can be reached at [mjohnson@wadenapj.com](mailto:mjohnson@wadenapj.com) or 218-631-2561.

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