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Blooming Prairie, Minnesota

TRAGEDY HITS NEW SCHOOL YEAR

Third grade girl killed in crash near Claremont

By HOWARD LESTRUD and RICK BUSSLER
STAFF WRITERS

Tragedy has marred the new school year in Blooming Prairie just days after school began as a third grader was killed in a car crash on her way to classes.

Emerson Harberts, 8, of Dodge Center died instantly in the vehicle driven by her mother Friday morning along a stretch of roadway in Dodge County that has become infamously known as the Highway of Horrors for the past 25 years. Rachel Marie Harberts, 43, and her son Jaxon, 12, are clinging to life at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester.



HARBERTS

Rachel is a teacher in the Blooming Prairie School District where she has taught for the past 16 years. She started out as a Title I teacher for three years before taking over first grade where she has been for the past 13 years.

Counseling is being offered at both schools as long as needed, according to Barry Olson, superintendent of BP Schools.

The horrifying chain of events began unfolding around 7:12 a.m. Friday as Rachel was on her way to Blooming Prairie for school where her two children attend. Rachel was driving a

2010 Mercury Milan on U.S. Highway 14 when she was attempting to make a left hand turn onto County Road 3 on the east edge of Claremont. The Harberts vehicle was stopped in the roadway presumably yielding to on-coming traffic in the section of two-lane highway that has been a political battleground for decades.

The State Patrol said a 2008 Hummer H3 driven by Tanner Ronald Kruckeberg, 24, of Dodge Center, rear-ended the Harberts vehicle. The impact launched the Harberts vehicle several hundred feet ahead into the opposing lane of traffic.

Two air ambulances—one from North Memorial and the other from Mayo—landed on the roadway. Rachel and Jaxon were airlifted from the scene to St. Mary's Hospital with life-threatening injuries, according to the patrol. Kruckeberg had no apparent injuries.

All persons involved in the crash were wearing their seat belts and no alcohol was suspected in either driver, the patrol said. The State

SEE CRASH, A3



Emerson Harberts, a third grader at Blooming Prairie Elementary school, is shown participating in Vacation Bible School activities at First Lutheran Church early this summer. She especially liked showing off her prowess with a hula hoop.

STAFF PHOTOS BY HOWARD LESTRUD



Making some tributes to Emerson Harberts with sidewalk chalk are Blooming Prairie High School graduate McKenna Hein, Riauna Bishop and Gemini Johnson. They were at the gathering at Central Park for the Rachel Harberts family.

Parents, students show outpouring of support

By HOWARD LESTRUD
STAFF WRITER

An outpouring of support was shown for the family of Rachel Harberts on Sunday afternoon when students and staff members of the Blooming Prairie Elementary School and high school gathered at Central Park.

Harberts, a first grade teacher at the BP Elementary School, was critically injured in a two-vehicle car crash last Friday near Claremont as was her son Jaxon, a seventh grader at Blooming Prairie High School.

Rachel and her son remain in St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester.

Daughter Emerson, 8, a third grader at the BP Elementary school, was another passenger in the vehicle driven by her mother. She was killed instantly.

Upwards of 150 people gathered at the park for a time of healing. Several clergy also attended.

No organized program or service was held. Just a time of fellowship was offered.

People gathered near the park pavilion, kids given the opportunity to play on the playground equipment, or create some messages on the sidewalk with chalk.

"This is devastating and hard for kids to understand."

Brenda Salinas
BP Parent

High school graduate McKenna Hein and two high school juniors Riauna Bishop and Gemini Johnson busily put messages on the sidewalk in remembrance of Emerson and in thought of healing for Rachel and Jaxon.

"This is a time of healing and sharing for our friend Emerson and for Jaxon and Mrs. Harberts," remarked The Rev. Thomas Niehaus of St. Columbanus Catholic Church of Blooming Prairie. "This showing of respect for the Harberts family comes from the heart," he said.

Niehaus, the Rev. Matt Fen-

SEE REACTION, A3

HELP THE HARBERTS FAMILY

A GoFundMe account has been established to assist the Harberts family at www.gofundme.com/rachel-and-jaxon-harberts.

As of Monday, \$25,401 of the \$50,000 goal had been pledged.

A PINK SHATTERING MOMENT

BP Cancer Group auctions set a new record

By HOWARD LESTRUD
STAFF WRITER

It may sound like a broken record and it is.

The 18th Annual Blooming Prairie Cancer Group benefit auctions, part of the Paint Blooming Prairie Pink event on Friday, Sept. 8 and Saturday, Sept. 9 brought in \$45,000, reports Cheri Krejci, treasurer of the organization.

This year's auction total broke last year's record of \$42,000. The monies came from bidders seeking some of the many donated items.

Three 1-pound packages of Hope Butter went for \$95 a package, just to give a taste of how items appealed to bidders.

Other activities sandwiched on the outside of the auctions, brought in an additional \$23,000 to bring the total contributions to over \$65,000, a new record.

More than 100 items were auctioned on Friday night and another 120 items on Saturday night, the biggest auction night. The Big Tent located just west of The Cue Company was crowded with bidders and workers. Both night auctions went from 7-11 p.m.

A team of auctioneers and emcees made the auctions a giant success. Auctioneers included Dave Thompson, Galen Peterson, Mark Ditlevson and Justin Krell. Emcees were Matt Braaten, Kelly Lamotte, Paul Tollefson and Josh Toquam. Auctioneers cleverly made appeals



John Kraling of Blooming Prairie is always willing to be a model for Cuts for a Cure, part of the BP Cancer Group's Paint BP Pink activities. Here, he shows a fish he caught recently. "I was going to the hardware store but don't think I will now," he laughed.

STAFF PHOTOS BY HOWARD LESTRUD

both nights to help the BP Cancer Group Community Fund. On Friday night, 40 bidders flashed their bidding numbers to donate \$40 each or \$1,600 total for parking passes for those taking treatments for cancer.

On Saturday night, auctioneers challenged bidders to donate \$50 gas cards. The total has not yet been tabulated.

A benefit raffle also culminated with a drawing at 10 p.m. on Saturday night. The raffle was in memory of longtime Blooming Prairie area farmer Steve Prihoda.

First prize of \$1,000 was won by Baby French (the unborn baby of Lindsey and

Ryan French. Ryan's father bought tickets for all of his grandchildren. Baby French was the winner.

Second place of \$300 was won by Tony Jensen and third place of \$200 was won by Matt Cisinaro.

"I just want to thank everybody for their support, time and talent donated and for the many wonderful items donated," remarked Cheri Krejci. "I just can't believe all the work done on these events," she continued.

"It takes a whole committee to pull off something like this and we did it."

Gail Dennison, a representative

SEE CANCER GROUP, A8



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Anthony Buttera, training and compliance officer at the Steele County Detention Center, will receive a top state honor this week in Brainerd. He has been with the jail for 11 years.

Jail training officer wins state award

By RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

The training and compliance officer for the Steele County Detention Center will earn a prestigious state award this week.

Anthony Buttera of Owatonna will be receiving the Tom Reid Excellence in Training Award through the Minnesota Sheriff's Association at a conference Thursday in Brainerd.

Jail administrator Jodi Bushey nominated Buttera for the top honor for his efforts in revitalizing an important area that had been eliminated. Buttera was selected for the position in March 2017 after it had been cut a few years prior. He took over at a time when training records and the jail's training program were unorganized and, in

SEE STATE AWARD, A8

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