

State warns of invasive insect in wreathes

By Abel Mehari

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Wreathes, swags, boughs and other evergreen decorations are being removed from two major retail stores in Minnesota due to an invasive insect, and state residents are being urged by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to burn items, or bag and throw them away.

The state department

said many of evergreen products that originated from North Carolina have been infected by an invasive and hazardous insect called EHS.

“Unless you know you purchased evergreen products from a locally grown source, residents should err on the side of caution and burn, or bag and throw away your evergreen items,” Assistant Agriculture Commissioner Whitney Place

said.

As of now, the MDA has discovered EHS at Home Depot and Menards locations and both companies have cooperated with inspectors to remove any remaining products off shelves.

Earlier in the week the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection issued a similar warning after they found EHS in several retail businesses.

The insect, originally from Asia, already has invaded 16 eastern states and is known to damage more than 40 species of evergreens. The tiny creatures use a hair-like probe to suck nutrients out of each needle. Infested needles eventually turn brown and fall off.

Elongate hemlock scale operates on the underside of evergreen needles. They are hard to kill

with pesticides, experts say, and the infestation weakens the tree, making it vulnerable to other issues. Many of the infested trees perish.

Because the insect especially likes fir, spruce and hemlock it has the potential to damage the state’s nursery industry as well as the state’s vast forests and urban and suburban landscapes.

EHS has a complex life cycle with several growth

stages. After hatching from eggs, “crawlers” begin feeding on the underside of needles and secrete a waxy brown cover around themselves as they grow, creating the “scale” that is visible. The crawlers may establish new infestations. Wind and birds may also disperse infestations to new trees.

The Duluth News Tribune contributed to this story.

IMPACT

From Page 1

My wife, Celeste, also a reporter at the Echo Press, went to the crash site with me and she solemnly took video while I shot photos.

Unlike what you see in TV shows and movies about reporters callously covering tragedies while looking for a scoop, this wasn’t something either of us enjoyed. It was heartbreaking. And it was especially numbing to know how much this would hurt those who loved the pilot.

The pilot, I found out later that night after authorities had notified the family, was someone I knew — Ken Ryan. Ken was a long-time instructor at the Alexandria Technical and Community College and a member of the Alexandria Planning Commission. I’d interviewed him a few times and talked to him at meetings.

Just a few months before, Ken sent me a letter to the editor, thanking ALP crews for fixing a water main leak in front of his house and extending appreciation for “all of the hard-working, day-to-day, in-the-trench technicians and experts who provided us a minimally disrupted service of such a basic need as clean, safe water.”

That, from my own personal viewpoint and from those who knew him best, was Ken — on-point, intelligent, upbeat and a person who saw the good in others.

To top off the weekend, a furnace or water heater exploded in a house on County Road 22 Sunday afternoon, triggering a fire. I went to the scene and took photos of firefighters putting the fire out. Thankfully, there were no injuries.

All in all, it was a weekend I’ll always remember — the bad, the good and the tragic.

Leif Enger comes to town

Many years ago, I pulled a book off a library bookshelf. It had sort of a misty cover, with a horse and rider and some trees. It was called “Peace Like a River,” by Leif Enger, and it looked interesting so I took it home.

I might have been living in Bemidji at the time, or maybe still in Alabama.

The book captured me. I think I probably didn’t breathe from page 1 until the very end. There was so much kindness to the book, a mysticism, a smashing good plot, and characters I loved.

At the time, I didn’t

know that Leif Enger was from Osakis. I knew little about Alexandria or Osakis and certainly never thought that someday I would work here.

So when I learned that Enger had just published a new novel, “Virgil Wander,” and that he was coming to Alexandria to sign books, well, I simply had to interview him.

They say that novels often reflect the worldview of the writer, and in our telephone interview on Nov. 29, Enger certainly reflected the kindness instilled in his main characters.

He was neither impatient nor distant, and though the New York Times raves about his books, he was not too wrapped up in himself to inquire about my own life. Having spent his boyhood in Osakis, he no longer has many connections there. His parents have died and his siblings live elsewhere.

I observed how odd it is, to once have such ties to a place that are then broken. And the places go on without you.

Instantly he asked if that had been my experience too. It would have been tempting to fill him in on my childhood home and how my parents had sold it several years ago. In fact, Enger is the kind of guy anyone could sit down and have a wonderful conversation with. His books reflect him well.

After I finished writing my story about him, I immediately plunged into reading his second novel, “So Brave, Young, and Handsome,” and chuckled my way through it. And read and re-read his sentences. Each sentence was a work of craftsmanship. Then my husband, Miles, read it, and from time to time would read something aloud, reveling in it just as much as I had.

What a joy, to be able to interview someone who has brought so much pleasure to millions of readers, and to be able to share that experience in the pages of this newspaper.

An impressive show of respect

One of the interesting things about being a newspaper photographer is that you sometimes

get to be a spectator in things that not everyone else has a chance to experience.

On the weekend of May 19, my editor called me and asked if I

could take pictures at the Steven Hlinsky funeral. Hlinsky, who was also known as “Beaver,” was a long-time member of the Forada Fire Department. He had died earlier that week after being assaulted outside of a bar in Forada.

The funeral was an important event because Hlinsky was well-known in the community from his service with the fire department. And we needed to cover the event because his tragic death impacted so many people.

However, I wasn’t eager to be there. I didn’t want to intrude on this solemn occasion or get in the way. Even though some people may have the idea that reporters and photographers are nosy and enjoy intruding in other people’s lives, I’ve found that that’s not usually true. Reporters care about their communities and the people, and they don’t want to get in the way. But they have an important job to do that isn’t always fun.

So I went to the funeral hoping to be as unobtrusive as possible.

When I arrived, the parking lot next to the church was packed with fire trucks. They weren’t just from Forada. They were from Alexandria and all the neighboring towns, as well as Starbuck, Villard, Cyrus and Brooten. The Alexandria ladder truck was parked next to the church entrance with a U.S. flag hanging from its bucket over the door.

My editor and I watched from a distance as they brought the casket out between rows of firefighters wearing their best dress uniforms and placed it in the hearse. I took a few photos without getting too close.

I then drove to a spot on the path the procession would take that would make for some interesting photos. As the procession moved past, led by several trucks from the Forada Fire Department, other fire trucks and emergency vehicles formed a line as far as I could see in the distance.

The graveside service was even more touching, as firefighters formed a line, each laying a rose on the casket. And then there was the last call, where Hlinsky was paged over the radio and thanked for his years of service, followed by all the fire trucks at the cemetery turning on their sirens.

Sometimes the camera insulates you from what is happening, because all your attention is on getting good photos. But I will surely remember what happened that day.

Hlinsky’s impact obviously went a lot further than Forada. It was impressive to see how the community and others outside the area stood by this man, who they may not even have known, and how their profession bound them all together.

In the end, it was a privilege to be able to witness the funeral firsthand and to be able to share the experience with our readers.

A run for the record books

It’s natural for players to get nerves before big games, but maybe you did not know that

reporters can experience butterflies, too.

At least I have at certain times in my career. Just like players want to seize the moment during a championship game, I want to write the

best story when those stories matter most.

Those uneasy feelings have subsided quite a bit 11 years into this job. I’m more comfortable now, but I remember having a different feeling in my stomach when I went to the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul on March 10, 2018.

The Alexandria boys hockey team was fresh off a 6-1 thumping of perennial Class A power Hermantown in the state semifinals, and was about to play Orono for a championship. That had never happened for the Cardinals. Win or lose, this was already history. My job was to record the final pieces of that as best as I could.

As a reporter, I never root for a win or a loss, but there was no doubt a win for Alexandria would make for a great final chapter to this story. Instead, Orono won a 2-1 game, and I had to figure out the best way to tackle a loss that I knew would be tough on players and coaches.

First and foremost, my job was to deliver the facts of the game. Penalties hurt Alexandria in the second period and did not allow the Cardinals to generate much offense. A perfect bounce for Orono off the boards and right to the stick of Landon Wittenberg led to the Spartans’ game-winner in the third period. Those were the details, but this story felt like it needed to be much more than just a play-by-play.

As I walked to the press conference with players and coaches, I thought back to a game I covered of this team on Dec. 12 of last season. The Cardinals got beat soundly by St. Cloud Cathedral on their home ice. I never thought I would be covering Alexandria in a state championship game after watching them play that night.

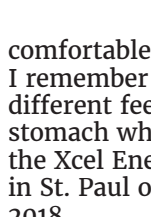
That seemed to me to be the story of that team. The Cardinals came a long way. They beat Cathedral in the second overtime of the section championship game as part of five straight postseason wins.

The theme of this story seemed clear — set the scene, show the disappointment players were feeling in that moment but let them describe the special run they had just went on.

Success in sports is often determined by wins and losses, but I couldn’t tell you what my



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team’s record was my senior year of basketball or baseball. I remember the bus rides, cracking jokes with buddies on the bench and just the thrill of competing.

Alexandria did not win its first state championship last year, but the Cardinals competed on the grand stage of high school hockey. That’s something worth remembering.

Dedication on display

I had just gotten home from work on a Saturday afternoon last summer when the familiar tones

for an ambulance call sounded on the police scanner. The dispatcher said that a baby had been run over.

Those words couldn’t have been more chilling.

Instinctively, I grabbed the scanner and a camera and headed out the door, before realizing I didn’t know where Chippewa Park was. A smartphone bailed me out, and before long I had driven through Brandon and was standing on a road leading into the park from County Road 108, impatiently awaiting the arrival of a LifeLink helicopter.

A veteran EMT was keeping me company, and what became instantly clear was a characteristic he shared with every other EMT I have known over the course of my career: Dedication.

They are always there, in the dead of night, in the worst conditions, leaving behind family functions and other responsibilities to answer the call, to help others in their time of need.

We hear the calls, and we know how often they are needed. We’ve been on the other end of things, where we’ve been the ones in need of emergency help. We’ve seen them do wonders and save lives.

That’s a big part of what drives many EMTs. It’s probably the biggest part. But it doesn’t come without its challenges, and these jobs become more challenging when working in close-knit communities, where chances are you’re going to know the person on the other end.

Seeing life-and-death situations up close — and being unable to undo what has happened — can take an emotional toll. People can burn out. One tragedy too many can cause an EMT to say enough’s enough.

It’s not always the big one, either. It can simply be the last straw. That’s why a friend who has been doing it for as long as I can remember says it’s important to take time off when needed, to find someone to talk to, to make up for family time you miss, and to be able to file things away once they’re done, “even though you know that you’ll never really forget.”

To see the dedication of these men and women who drop everything to respond to emergencies is to see the best in humankind.

You see it from others who are called in these types of situations, too. You saw it this past week when a tanker

tipped on the interstate between Brandon and Evansville, and so many responded to the scene in the worst of conditions, assisting with that driver and others, with traffic, and engineering a complicated removal of the tanker.

You see it in so many professions, and it’s what holds everything together. And it illuminates how much we need each other.

Privileged to tell these stories

Reflecting back on all the stories in 2018 I was privileged to write about, I realize what an

incredible job I have. Yet it’s those stories I would rather not write but know I have to write that are often the ones that most stick

with me, hit my heart the hardest and make an impact, no matter the outcome.

Take, for example, the case of a 15-year-old Alexandria girl who went missing in the fall of 2017. The three men arrested in connection with her abduction all pleaded guilty this year, with one sentenced to 25 years in prison; the other two are still awaiting their sentences. This case will forever hold a special place in my heart because of the connection I now feel I have with the Block family.

This area has had its share of tragedy and there have been several deaths; we’ve lost some really, really good people. The one that really hit home was the death of a Forada firefighter, farmer and father of two, following an apparent senseless act of violence.

Sitting down and talking to his two grown children and his mother was one of the hardest interviews I’ve had to do in my career. I will always remember driving down their long driveway afterward as tears were flowing freely down my face. His kids are close to my son’s age, and I can’t imagine my son’s life without his dad.

This story isn’t over as the case is currently making its way through the court system. No matter how it turns out, his children will never get to see him again. He’s gone forever.

I don’t always write about the tragedies. I am fortunate to also write about feel-good stories that leave a positive impression.

This year, I had the honor of writing about four community members who are all 100 years old. There were two women who have known each other their whole lives, and then there were two men, veterans who fought in World War II.

Having lost both of my parents last year, it is such a treat to spend time talking to the older and wiser people of our community. It brightens my day and puts a smile on my face to hear their stories and then have the opportunity to share them with our readers.

I look forward to 2019 and I am excited to see who in this great community I get to write about next.



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