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# Forest Lake Times

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## Wyoming principal placed on leave, resigns

*Former high school assistant principal assigned as interim*

**Hannah Davis**  
Community Editor

Wyoming Elementary School Principal Curt Slater was placed on administrative leave earlier this school year, and his resignation was officially accepted by the Forest Lake School Board during its Dec. 5 meeting. Though the resignation is effective June 30, 2020, Slater's official last day was Nov. 20. Slater declined to comment on the situation or the reasons for the departure. Though school district administration did not offer a formal statement from the district on the situation, it did offer assurances to The Times that student safety was never an issue in regards to the situation.

"I would like to thank Mr. Slater for his dedicated service and I wish him all the best as he pursues other opportunities," Superintendent Steve Massey said. The Times submitted a data privacy act request for information regarding Slater's resignation, including his separation agreement. According to the separation agreement document, Slater is being paid his full salary and benefits through the remainder of the school year. From Dec. 2, 2019, to April 7, 2020, he will be utilizing accrued sick leave pay. Following that, the school district will continue to pay Slater on paid administrative leave. Slater will also be paid for nine unused vacation days following the date of his resignation in June. The Times requested information regarding the reason for Slater's resignation and administrative leave, but it was not listed in the documentation provided by the district. Additional data regarding his resignation was deemed by the district to be non-public information at this time. Former Forest Lake Area High School Assistant Principal Kathy Ungerecht, who retired effective June 2019, was hired to complete the school

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## A very dairy Christmas

*How a creamery, and some eggnog, helped save Autumnwood Farm*

**Hannah Davis**  
Community Editor

It's a chilly December morning, and dawn is still several hours away, but Pat Daninger is up moving the delivery trucks and feeding the cows on Autumnwood Farm in Forest Lake.

"I do really enjoy being up and working when it's getting light," Daninger said. "It is invigorating." He looks forward to those early morning chores, though he admits that some days when the cold is bitter, he's a little less enthusiastic. Just before dawn, he's herding in his 75 cows for morning milking, his dog Briscoe at his heels, while his wife Sharlene heads out to bottle-feed the calves.

Shortly before dawn's break, Autumnwood plant manager Jacob Muinch and his staff

at the creamery sanitize machines and equipment to begin their day of making and bottling the farm's fresh eggnog. There's hardly any downtime on a farm and creamery, but this time of year is especially busy as they make the popular holiday drink. Only one batch of eggnog will be made today, about 235 gallons worth, which takes about four hours from start to finish. They'll be back again tomorrow and over the weekend, likely spending long 12-plus hour days bottling milk and more eggnog, which they typically begin making and selling around Halloween.

That eggnog has become one of the creamery's best-sellers, and it's a struggle for the operation to keep up with the demand. It's a good problem to have, if you ask Daninger.

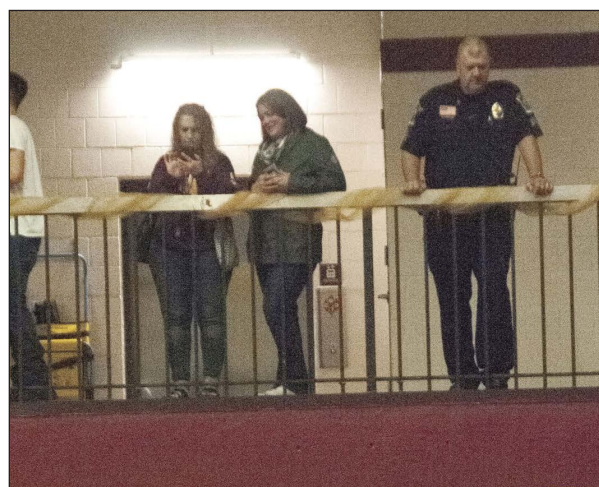
"We make about 4,000 gallons in those two months," Muinch said. In addition to being sold on-site at the farm's dairy store, it's also in over 40 metro-area groceries.

Eggnog see page 2



Photo by Hannah Davis  
Eggnog made with fresh milk from Autumnwood Farm is distributed throughout 40 different grocery stores around the metro area. Each batch of eggnog made uses 195 gallons of milk and will make 235 gallons of eggnog.

## The top local stories of 2019



### A year of growth, with change on the horizon

**Ryan Howard**  
News Editor

In a decade where the biggest topics around the Forest Lake area often focused on conflict, 2019 was a quieter year than many that preceded it. Though there were still a few contentious council

decisions and moments of tragedy, it was also a year of contemplation, with big infrastructure and education projects wrapping up and community leaders looking to what the future will hold for the area.

The Times has pored through its archives over the last 12 months to put together a look at 10 of the biggest stories in the area in 2019. It's a list we hope encapsulates

many of the community's most pressing discussions throughout the year, while also pointing the way toward potential big issues in the year to come.

### 10. Meg Maurer

Forest Lake was shocked when one of its young lights – Margaret "Meg" Maurer, 21 – was suddenly dimmed after

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# News



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## Eggnog

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### Grass to glass saves the farm

Daninger loves the farming business, but it's far from easy. It means long hours, hard work, and it's certainly not lucrative. But "There's life-blood, there's passion. ... It's a way of life," he said. He's making the local dairy farm, the farm he grew up on, and his dad before him, an area staple.

Autumnwood Farm has been a family legacy since it started in 1902, when Daninger's grandfather emigrated from Austria. Mike and Florence Daninger, Pat's parents, purchased the farm when Mike returned from World War II, and in the early 1990s, Pat and his wife Sharlene took over when they purchased the farm. In 2002, however, things were looking dire, financially.

"We've been with the Minnesota Farm Business Management program since the early 90s, and we've tracked the decline of profits each year," Daninger said. "So we thought, 'This is not working. We're producing an undifferentiated commodity on a small scale; we either need to produce it on a large scale, which is not feasible in this area, or increase the value of what we have.'"

That's when they began to devise a plan to begin their own creamery by bottling and selling their own milk and dairy products. Five years later, they built the creamery building, and by February of 2008, the new creamery equipment was installed.

"We had just 24 hours with [the man we purchased it from], and that was it; we were on our own," Daninger said. On March 6, 2008, two years to the date of Mike's death, the creamery opened for business.

The next two years were a big struggle, Daninger said. The economy collapsed, and the purchase of the equipment and the change in business model had them in \$200,000 worth of debt. Things were looking rough, and at that point, Daninger said all options were on the table.

"I kept thinking 'Do we quit?' Well, if we quit at that point, we lose everything, sell everything. All potential retirement was out, all future plans



Ryan Muinch (left), plant manager, works with Rick Kiehne to pour the cream into the vat for a batch of Autumnwood Farm eggnog.

Photos by Hannah Davis

for the kids," Daninger said. "Well, we're going to stick to it and try to push through and see if it'll work. If we had not have had the creamery at that time, we quite likely would've hung it up." Not voluntarily, he added; farmers rarely quit.

It took seven years for the creamery to turn a profit, and for the last four years, it's kept the business afloat in the agricultural financial crisis many farmers face today due to the perfect storm of continued low prices of agriculture products, the trade war with China, and a difficult weather.

"We would not have been able to withstand this four-year skid that the rest of the industry has gone through," Daninger said.

He also credits much of staying afloat those first years due to the help and love of two of his good friends: his longtime neighbor Butch Bergmann, who grew up on a farm, and Jim Reiter, a friend from church whose grandparents had a farm. Both men had recently retired but still wanted to work, and for two years they worked on the farm with no pay.

"If it hadn't been for those two guys, it wouldn't have worked," Daninger said.

### A very dairy Christmas

Eleven years ago, someone mentioned the idea of making eggnog at the creamery. Daninger couldn't remember whose idea it was for the new product.

"Probably Butch or Jim's," he said.

The farm received

some samples of various eggnog mixes and Daninger used the time with his kids at home to test the mixes out.

"It was just something - never really expecting it to take off - but just something fun to try. We had no idea it would be such a hit," Daninger said. One particular recipe was made with the family all together, and Daninger said it was easy to tell that was the one to go with.

"This flavor didn't even make it out of the house for the crew to try," Daninger chuckled.

That particular recipe has a pumpkin spice flavor, a flavor that has boomed nationwide in recent years. The eggnog was a hit right away, and it quickly became many families' favorites each year as it was distributed amongst grocery stores.

"We didn't know pumpkin spice was going to be so popular," Daninger said. "There's pumpkin spice everything now. We just thought it'd be something fun to try, and we stumbled into something."

The first year, Daninger said, the farm made about 400 gallons of the eggnog.

"We made some and couldn't keep up with the demand at Christmas time. It was like, 'Wow, it just disappeared,'" Daninger said. For several years, the Daningers planned for more and still struggled to meet demand. Last year, they sold just under 4,000 gallons, and by the end of eggnog season this year it'll likely be over that.

Several years ago, Cub Foods in Forest Lake ran out earlier than the expected delivery date, so

Daninger brought a load of the creamery's most recent batch.

"Before we got the load unloaded, the loudspeaker comes on. 'Autumnwood Farm eggnog is now available in the dairy department.' I kind of chuckled. I thought 'Really, it's that big deal?'" Daninger said.

One reason Muinch thinks it's such a hot-seller is the different pasteurization process the eggnog goes through. The milk, cream, and eggnog mix is added to a vat. Most milk is mass-produced and pasteurized. It's pumped through a system that brings the milk up to extremely hot temperatures for a short amount of time. The process Autumnwood performs uses the vat to bring the milk up to a lower temperature for a longer amount of time. That process, Muinch said, helps keep the integrity of the taste of the milk while still killing pathogens.

The eggnog also just tastes better, Muinch said, with the quality of the milk and cream being the most obvious factor. "We keep the whole milk whole. ... It's not some magic formula, it's not voodoo; it's just really good milk and cream," Muinch said. "He's got a good section of cows that are well taken care of."

Whatever the reason for its popularity, Daninger is humbled and grateful.

"It's gratifying. That we can be a small part of their Christmas celebration is pretty cool," Daninger said. "We're thankful that it has worked so far, and I don't ever want to take that for granted."

### Faith, family, and farming

If there's one thing that's consistent among the Daninger family, it's the importance of their three f's: faith, family, and farming. Christmas tradition for the family dictates that on Christmas Eve they will all do chores together, go to church together, and finally celebrate Christmas with gifts and food together.

All four of Daninger's children have been involved in agriculture professionally at some point, and three of them are still involved in some form or another. Two of the children have spoken about interest in taking over the family farm next, which was the hope Pat and Sharlene had for their children if they wanted it.

In the early 2000s, Pat and Sharlene discussed "very briefly" the possibility of changing careers and selling the land. They knew the land the farm sits on was valuable.

However, the thought of not giving their children the upbringing they wanted for them didn't sit well with them, nor did the idea of not giving the children the option to take over the family farm someday.

"The kids, right at that time, were starting to get interested in agriculture. ... We wanted to give them an opportunity to be involved in agriculture, so that was the propelling interest," Daninger said. "[If we sold,] we thought, 'We'd have a lot of money and kids with no work to do, and that's not good.' So we opted for the other extreme: a lot of work to do, and not much money. And the kids have turned out well, and you can't put a price tag on that, no matter how much money you generate."

So the Daningers did what they believed would be best: step out in their faith with the creamery.

"Before we got the business off the ground, we held a dedication service and dedicated it to the service of God and asked his blessing on it," Daninger said. He said that his family's faith in God has brought the right people at the right time to see its success.

As for the eggnog's popularity, Daninger said he doesn't want to read too much into it, but it's a joy to see its popularity continue to grow.

"It is fun when you get those panicked calls at the last minute saying, 'We have to have it! Do you have any left?' 'Oh, there's two bottles,' and they'll say, 'Save them, I'm coming,'" he said.

You can find the eggnog, along with Autumnwood Farm milk products, at the Autumnwood Dairy Store at 19435 Granada Ave. N. in Forest Lake, or in grocery stores such as Cub, Kowalski's, Festivals, Oxendale Market, and Knowlan's across the metro area, from Bloomington to Excelsior to North Branch. The Autumnwood Dairy Store's hours and a complete list of grocery stores that carry the milk can be found at autumnwoodfarmllc.com.



Pat Daninger, a third generation dairy farmer on Autumnwood Farm, milks his cows in the morning. That milk will be bottled and sold fresh from the Autumnwood Dairy Store next door or brought to local grocery stores and coffee shops.

## Slater

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year as principal of Wyoming Elementary School, beginning on Dec. 9 and running through June 8, 2020. She will be paid a \$45,000 salary and benefits through the duration of her contract, including \$6,336 toward a post-retirement health saving account.

Slater's resignation comes not long after his nomination for and winning of the 2018 Minnesota National Distinguished Principal award, an honor bestowed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. He

traveled to Washington, D.C., to represent the state at the association's annual convention in the fall of that year. Slater has also worked independently from the school district performing training for the Minnesota Department of Education's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports initiative.

According to his LinkedIn profile, Slater recently listed a new job as a co-owner and trainer at an education consulting company. Prior to his time at Wyoming Elementary School, he was an assistant principal in the Wayzata School District for eight years and in the Princeton School District for almost four prior to that.

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