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# the Tower-Soudan TIMBERJAY

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## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### Senator Tina Smith visits Ely

Sulfide mining overshadows 'Rural Economy Tour'

by KEITH VANDERVORT  
Ely Editor

Ely— Minnesota's junior U.S. Senator, Tina Smith, visited Ely for the first time as a senator on Tuesday, as part of a "Rural Economy Tour" with state and local leaders.

Her visit included brief stops at the Ely-Bloomenson Community Hospital, to learn about EBCH's expansion plans, as well as tours at the Ten Below Networking facility, Crapola World Headquarters, Wolfland Computers and Hobby, and See...**TOUR** pg. 10

Minnesota's Sen. Tina Smith, along with State Rep. Rob Ecklund, right, visited Tuesday with Brian and Andrea Strom at the Crapola World Headquarters in Ely. photo by K. Vandervort



## CANINE CELEBRITIES

### Sled dog movie stars



Tower musher's dogs depict Balto and Togo in 'Great Alaskan Race,' set to open Oct. 25

by JODI SUMMIT  
Tower-Soudan Editor

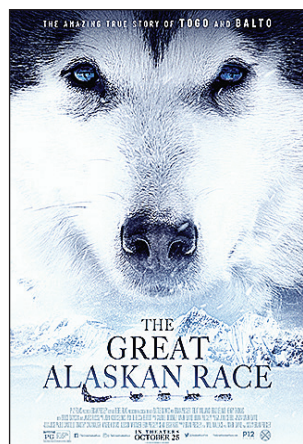
TOWER—They are big, beautiful, and love attention. And this pair of Alaskan malamutes, known as Saffron and Kira to their owner Ashley Thaumert, will soon be experiencing the limelight like never before.

The two sled dogs, who live with Thaumert and about two dozen other dogs in rural Tower, will soon be known as Balto and Togo, the lead "actors"

See...**STARS** pg. 9



Ashley Thaumert gives some extra attention to two of her Alaskan Malamutes, Kira and Saffron, at her rural Tower home. The two sled dogs are starring in a new movie, "The Great Alaskan Race," based on the historic sled dog run to transport medical supplies. photo by J. Summit



## RETAIL

### Mini-Zup's now open in Cook

by JODI SUMMIT  
Tower-Soudan Editor

COOK—"Our first day was wonderful," said long-time Zup's store employee Toni Swanson. "There were so many friendly faces. Everyone is so happy to see us back."

While the reconstruction of the Zup's Grocery Store is yet to begin, a smaller store, a "Mini-Zup's" is now open next door to the former grocery store location, right behind the Subway.

Last November, the Cook's Zup's store was destroyed after an overnight electrical fire gutted portions of the building and created extensive smoke damage. Initial See...**COOK** pg. 11



## COUNTY SCHOOLS

### Tower's 'lunch lady' settles pay dispute with ISD 2142

by MARSHALL HELMBERGER  
Managing Editor

REGIONAL— The longtime head lunch lady at the Tower School has reached a settlement agreement with the St. Louis County School District that ends a lawsuit filed in June over allegations that the district systematically paid her less than she was owed.

Under the agreement, Marilyn Turnbull, of Tower, will receive \$12,500 in a one-time lump sum settlement, \$1,975 of which will go to the Halunen Law Firm, which represented her in the case. Turnbull agrees to drop any further claims for lost income stemming from the school district's refusal to classify her as a head cook despite the fact that she served as the school's only cook

See... **PAY** pg. 10



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**STARS...**Continued from page 1

in the real-life adventure movie that premieres in 500 markets in the U.S. on Oct. 25. The major motion picture is based on true events, surrounding a 1925 diphtheria outbreak in Nome, Alaska. With vital medicine all but depleted and the city's port locked in ice, rescuers turned to a sled dog team to deliver the medicine, saving many lives.

Saffron and Kira, along with Thaemert, will be flying out to Hollywood in late October for the film's big premiere.

While many know the outlines of the story that was fictionalized in the animated 1995 film "Balto" (where Balto was voiced by Kevin Bacon), this film tells the true, inspirational story of the almost-impossible plan to bring the life-saving serum in over 650 miles from Nenana (near Fairbanks) to Nome by a relay of sled dog teams. Intense winter weather meant planes couldn't fly, and the sea was already frozen over, preventing shipments by boat.

Ashley Thaemert had no intention of making stars out of her two all-time favorite dogs.

Saffron was her first-ever sled dog, which she obtained as a puppy when she was 14 years old and living in the Twin Cities.

"The first time I hooked Saffron up to a sled he knew what to do," she said. This was good, she noted, because at that point she had no formal sled dog experience. Kira came along three years later. Thaemert moved with her dogs to Colorado when she was 18, to work for a sled dog outfitting company based in Pagosa Springs. There she worked for five years and learned the art and sport of handling sled dogs, both for hauling gear and racing.

In 2017, writer/director Brian Presley, who also stars in the movie, contacted the company she was working for, seeking dogs and handlers for the movie he was filming in Colorado, and Thaemert, along with six of her dogs, and four more dogs owned by the kennel, were hired for the shooting.

"He'd only been dog-sledding once," she said, "while he was on a vacation in Alaska. I had to teach him everything."

All the mushing in the movie was "real," said Thaemert. "We'd do runs of 10 to 20 miles, filming all day." A lot of the



**Kira and Saffron are just two of Ashley Thaemert's over two dozen sled dogs. The three of them will be flying out to Hollywood later next month for the premiere of "The Great Alaskan Race."** photo by J. Summit

filming was done as high up as 13,000 feet on the Red Mountain Pass, near Silverton.

The film crew had little experience working in deep snow in cold conditions, and sometimes they weren't equipped for the weather that came their way. At least once, Thaemert, whose dog-hauling truck was equipped for travel on snowy mountain passes, had to help the film crew dig their truck out of the ditch. When in particularly difficult terrain, she sometimes helped drive the snowmobile that was used for filming on the trail.

"Most of the crew came from Hollywood," she said. "They didn't always have the gear or experience they needed out in the snow."

They filmed in all types of weather, including some blizzards.

Thaemert said Saffron was well-suited to take on the role of Balto, even though the Alaskan Malamute does not look like the real-life Balto, who was a mixture of Malamute and village dog. "He is the best lead dog I've ever had," she said. Saffron trained in Kira, who plays Togo.

The real-life Togo was an Alaskan Husky, a speedier dog than the Malamutes, who are slow and strong-bred to haul freight in deep snow.

The dogs did a great job on the set. The entire team, she said, was in top shape after running guided trips most of the season.

"The dogs made me so proud," she said.

The team did take a while to get used to having Presley as their musher. They were used to responding to Thaemert

or other female mushers and hadn't really worked with a male before. In the beginning, Thaemert was often right behind Presley, off camera, instructing the dogs, but eventually they did get used to Presley.

"There was a lot of training for Brian and the crew on how to manage the dogs and the sled."

On challenging terrain, Thaemert usually ran the team, acting as a stunt double. Filming was done by cameras either in front of or in back of the team, and often by overhead drone.

Some scenes were a challenge, she said. The dogs didn't like having to turn around and retrace a route if a scene needed to be reshot. There were also times when the dogs were all harnessed and ready to run, but then they would have to wait several hours because of a camera or lighting issue. That, sheo-

said, was hard for the dogs.

But mostly, she said, the dogs had a great time. They were fed very well while on set, she said.

The filming was also challenging for Thaemert. The workday often lasted 12 hours, and she still needed to do her "dog chores." At night, most of the dogs slept in kennel boxes on the back of her truck, which meant lifting each dog up and down multiple times a night. Some of these dogs weigh nearly as much as Thaemert.

"I was tired," she said.

**Back at home**

Thaemert moved to rural Tower with her partner, Michael Tam, a couple of years ago. Her dogs have settled into northern Minnesota life quite well. Saffron is now retired, sleeping indoors at night, and spending lots of time outdoors during the day.

The sled dogs spend the summer in a heavily-wooded and well-shaded area, and are out in a more open area in the winter. Thaemert keeps an exceptionally clean dog yard and feeds her dogs meat and fish year-round. They are very fond of both beaver (bought from trappers) and suckers, purchased from the Vermilion Lake Association each spring during walleye-netting season. The retired dogs and this year's pups have a large kennel next to their house. The retired dogs have "yard privileges" and can sleep indoors.

Kira will probably be retiring this year. Thaemert is worried that she is developing arthritis and was bringing her up to the Ely Vet Clinic this week for a check up.

"When my dogs are ready to retire, they retire," she said. Some dogs may run for 15 years and get upset if you leave them at home, but others, she said, are ready for a more leisurely life.

"Saffron and Kira both know they are lead dogs," she said. "Lead dogs have special privileges. They get to wander in the yard. Lead dogs make all the difference, and I reward them."

Thaemert, who is currently working as a waitress at the Vermilion Club, is still training in her teams of dogs, both for guiding and hauling. She had a litter of five puppies last year, and another litter of three this year, so she has plenty of new dogs to get ready. She plans to offer trips and introductory sled

dog adventures in future years.

**The Great Alaskan Race**

The film, which is rated PG, features Brian Presley as the musher Leonhard Seppala, Treat Williams as Dr. Welch, Brad Leland as Mayor Maynard, and Henry Thomas as Thompson.

The trailer was just released and can be seen on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNdch6hWjEM>). Thaemert has not seen the film yet and is excited to see her dogs on the big screen.

The film, which is produced by P12 Films, has also chosen the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon as one of several nonprofits that will financially benefit from the film.

"We were fortunate enough to be granted the final nonprofit slot to benefit from a portion of proceeds of the film," said Monica Hendrickson, Beargrease spokesperson. "The Great Alaskan Race will bring attention to the unique history of sled dog mushing, and to the importance of its role in places like northern Minnesota and Alaska that relied on this mode of transportation due to terrain and weather for so many years."

A Minneapolis film premiere is also planned, along with a private screening event in Duluth.

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This year the Little Church at 6268 Wahlsten Road will be open for tours from 3:30 to 4:30 pm. Supervisor Bruce Swieringa will be available to answer questions on the history of the building.

If you have any questions, contact one of the Town Board members: Bruce Swieringa 741-1789, Sarah Schmidt 750-2524, Phil Anderson 749-3462, Steve Lotz 753-4129, Crystal Alaspa 750-4752.

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