



# WINTER SPORTS

Winter sports season is officially here, check out the Wadena Pioneer Journal's look at the season in a special section inside.

# Pioneer Journal

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Photos by Rebecca Mitchell / Pioneer Journal

Rayah Kysar (8) and Santa discuss Christmas dreams and available activities at Deer Creek's Santa Day on Dec. 7.



Michael Johnson / Pioneer Journal

Bill Stearns quietly entered the world of retirement Nov. 27. He stopped to reflect on his 42 years in the job while clearing out his office.

## With no regrets, Stearns retires

By Michael Johnson mjohnson@wadenaj.com

Offering insurance to those that want to be able to weather the storms of life has been a part of Bill Stearns' life for the last 42 years. Stearns worked all those years in Wadena after hearing about an opening at a State Farm insurance agency there while living in southern Minnesota. He and his young bride Audrey picked up and moved to the town they knew nothing about and set down roots that kept them here and involved ever since.

"This is where the opening was at State Farm, so this is where I ended up," Stearns said. At the time, Audrey recalls thinking she was moving to the big city. And at the time, Wadena was bigger in some respects. The 25 year old gal could peruse seven women's clothing stores. But things changed. State Farm soon stopped offering health insurance. Soon after, Audrey entered the world of insurance out of their home and eventually with her husband, housed in

the very same building across from Wesley Hospital.

At noon, Wednesday, Nov. 27, the day before Thanksgiving, Stearns sent off his final transactions and with family nearby, entered the world of retirement — with no regrets.

Stearns turns 70 in January and felt now was a good time to retire to make room for those things he and his wife still want to do. One thing they plan to do soon is travel to the Rose Bowl Parade with backstage passes to the event in California. It's been on Audrey's bucket list for some time.

"You can't work forever," Stearns said. The bulk of Stearns' clients go to a new agent in Perham, Jake Bothwell. As many of Stearns' customers come from East Otter Tail County, State Farm found it fitting to move operations to Perham. Bothwell is located at 127 E Main Street, Suite A in Perham, but maintains the Wadena phone number, 631-2999.

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## SANTA WHO?

John Saari explains what it's like to be the man in the red suit

By Rebecca Mitchell rrmitchell@wadenaj.com

"Merry Christmas!" The exclamation jingles across the room and down the hallways. It brings delight to those receiving the greeting, even a small lifting smile. And the next statement brings excitement, at least from those who come to meet Santa Claus, "What do you want for Christmas?" The lists spill out as Santa keeps track of the wishes and dreams of the toy names he recognizes from his elves. As whispers flurry with the question of "Is this the real Santa?" children pause for their photo with Santa and continue to wonder as they meet Santa in community centers, schools, hardware stores, lodges and banks.

At the Deer Creek Community Center, John Saari has arrived as Santa for the past four years. He calms the fears of children and listens to their wish lists while coloring books and treats are offered. Two elves ventured from the North Pole as well, Jazmine (9) and Jacobi (8) Saari. Following is a Q&A about what it's like to be Santa.

Q: Tell me about how you got to be Santa.

A: They had a long time Santa doing it and he retired and the city — my wife and I did daycare — so the city clerk at the time sort of suggested me and that's how I got it. This is my fourth year doing it. So yeah, it's been a lot of fun.

Q: Why did you want to be Santa? What do you enjoy about it?

A: I like kids, and like I said, my wife and I, at the time we ran a daycare so ... I knew a lot of the little kids around too and I have young children. ... So I still know what the toys are supposed to be and that sort of stuff, so yeah it's fun.

Q: How do you prepare for being Santa for the day?

A: I try to think of some jokes ahead of time and otherwise just try to get in a good mood and enjoy it. We had a little baby right away, the first one didn't cry so that's nice. You get plenty of them that are scared and then you're just trying to get them close enough so the picture can be taken. But, yeah, the first one was all smiling and everything so that sort of makes it easier the rest of the day.

Q: What would you say Santa means or represents to you or your kids?

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Santa welcomed children with the help of elves and friends, Alexis Midtling (left), Jazmine Saari and Jacobi Saari.

## Nativity brings together church community

By Rebecca Mitchell rrmitchell@wadenaj.com

Wadena area churches gathered together with songs of Christmas praise to light the community nativity at Wesley Lawn on Sunday, Dec. 8. The relaxed evening celebrated the birth of Jesus with songs, Scripture readings and prayer.

The Wadena Ministerial Association partnered with Tri-County Health Care to display the nativity for the fourth year and provided a fellowship space for the third year, according to the Rev. Nate Loer, Immanuel Lutheran Church lead pastor.



Rebecca Mitchell / Pioneer Journal

As a celebration of Christmas, area church members listened to Bible readings about Jesus being born and sang Christmas songs during the community nativity lighting on Dec. 8.

NATIVITY: Page A8

## Holiday Voices, Historical Society open house on Dec. 19

By Rebecca Mitchell rrmitchell@wadenaj.com

The Wadena County Historical Society Museum & Bookstore will host a time for holiday stories on Dec. 19. The event is a rendition of the monthly Minnesota Voices forum where art, history or science contributors present their work, according to the Wadena County Historical Society director Lina Belar.

At this year's Holiday Voices event, storyteller and poet Sonja Kosler and author Jerry Mevis-

sen will share their holiday-themed work from noon to 1 p.m.

"It's just a little bit to remind us of what the holiday season is for us personally and maybe to get in the spirit a little bit," Belar said.

Belar hopes the event, like many others the society hosts, will show people that people are more alike than different, even if people's experiences and perspectives are different.

STORIES: Page A8

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WEEKEND WEATHER

H: 25 L: 3 FRIDAY H: 10 L: 9 SATURDAY H: 7 L: 2 SUNDAY



At the end of the day, Santa and Jacobi (right) enjoy a visit with Cade Kysar (far left), Callie Kysar and Rayah.

**SANTA**

From Page A1

A: It gives everybody a little sense of joy. And the weather outside now is not always the greatest so it gives everybody a little spark for this time of the year, to make it through the rest of the winter.

Q: How would you keep up the holiday spirit throughout the day?

A: Make sure you smile at everybody and have a kind word and a hi. You never know when people are not having the greatest days so even one little smile or hi or something. It might not mean a lot to nine out of the 10 people but the tenth person ... it might help out.

Q: Can you tell me maybe a favorite story about a Christmas event that you've done as Santa?

A: I don't remember if it was last year or the year before but there was a grandma that came in with probably like a 3 year old and I was the

first Santa she'd sat on. They had tried a couple other Santas that year and I was the first one she didn't cry for and stuff, and the grandma came back and thanked me for the picture at least. That was probably my favorite one. She had cried at all the other ones ... They finally got a Christmas picture.

Q: Is there anything super crazy you've heard a kid ask for?

A: They asked for a Vexilar this year, one of the kids, the fishing sonar, otherwise ... they don't ask for a lot of crazy, expensive toys and stuff.

Jacobi hears her dad's comment and interjects, "But I did. I asked for an iPhone 11." And Jazmine shares, "I think the weirdest one was a little boy, he wanted a Christmas tree."

A: Yeah, one wanted a

Christmas tree this year. Otherwise it's the normal tractors, cars, dolls, they get pretty specific. I remember growing up it was a tractor or something but now they have the brand name and the size and everything.

Q: I had no idea that kids were so specific these days.

A: Well I know my daughters go through the catalogs and they did for grandma, and they said, "OK, circle some toys you would like" and there were four things in the catalog not circled. (Laughs) So, yeah, I just think they probably know a little bit more from TV and Facebook and everything. They probably see the toys more often now than they did in the past.

Q: Do you think Santa's an important part of the Christmas season? And if so, how?

A: I mean it's Jesus' birth but yeah for the little kids it's a way to look forward to something and ... for the parents it's be good or you won't get your gift but it can be seen as a reward. ... He can be a good role model and a good lesson to the little kids to be good and stuff like that.

Q: What is your favorite part about being Santa?

A: The kids, like the story I said about the little baby. ... If I can get a kid that doesn't quite want to come over to come over then that's the best part about being Santa, getting them to get rid of some of their fear and stuff because the beard and everything is scary. Deep voice, and yeah, it can be scary. But when they sit still and smile for Mom or Grandma then that's the best part.



RosaLin Alcoser / FOCUS

Ottertail Lions Club member Bob Rauch serves up pancakes at the Lions' breakfast Saturday at Otterdazzle.

**Visitors – and pancakes – flip at Otterdazzle**

By RosaLin Alcoser  
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OTTERTAIL — With food, activities for the kids, vendors, raffles a tree lighting and fireworks display, Otterdazzle kicked off the holiday season Saturday at the Ottertail Community Center.

The Otterdazzle festivities help support local businesses and raise money for various causes.

The morning started with the annual Lions Club pancake breakfast. Mike Potocki, president of the Ottertail Lions Club, said that the breakfast has been going on for over 10 years, with the club cooking up two breakfasts a year: one for Otterdazzle and the other at Otterfest.

This year, 140 people attended the Lions' holiday breakfast.

"Not a bad number, no," Potocki said. "About average to what we've had before." All the proceeds from the breakfast are donated back into the community, Potocki said. Also offering treats were the United Methodist Women of Ottertail United Methodist Church. All the goods at their Otterdazzle bake sale were provided by the church, and all the funds raised were donated to various missions. Among those were Helping Hearts, The Bridge and LB Hospice, as well as other local missions. The bake sale has been a part of Otterdazzle for over 20 years, said church member Gloria Clarke.

In the late afternoon in Ottertail City Park, rows of Christmas trees, decorated by local businesses and organizations, were lit. Then came the fireworks display and a chili bar. The evening was finished off with Christmas at the Creamery, all proceeds from the Christmas at the Creamery went to the Giving Tree through the Williams Company.

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