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# Leading the way

Bemidji United Way meets local needs, inspires state

By Annalise Braught  
abraught@bemidjipioneer.com

BEMIDJI — When the global pandemic hit the world earlier this spring, many around the community were sent reeling.



Alamano

The blow was softened for a number of people as the United Way of Bemidji Area stepped in to connect those in need with resources to help. And not

only are they pitching in on a local level, much of what they are doing is helping organizations around the state.

“We are leading the way on how we are approaching things on a state-wide perspective,” said Denae Alamano, executive director at the United Way of Bemidji Area.

As a member of the state board for the United Way of Minnesota she is able to connect with others and share ideas.

“I get on our state board calls sometimes hoping that I can get some ideas of things to do here,” Alamano said. “It seems like we are continually the ones bringing the ideas, which is great, I’m just kind of surprised at that. But it’s good, because that way we can help the whole state and that’s good for everybody.”

The three main things they have been focusing on are: response, recovery and rebuilding.

One of the major ways they have been responding to local issues occurring as a result of the pandemic have been things like their Emergency Fund, which was established back in March to help local businesses in Bemidji and surrounding areas. So far they have received more than \$160,000 in funding, and issued over \$104,000 to area organizations.

They have also been collaborating with Community Resource Connections and the community resource helpline 211.

“When people are wondering things like ‘when is the food shelf open?’ or ‘what are the new hours for Northern Dental Access Center?’ Or things like that,” Alamano explained.

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Photos by Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

**Above:** Steve Jewett, former commander of American Legion Post No. 14, places an American flag on a lamp post along Minnesota Ave. NW on Thursday evening in downtown Bemidji. **Below:** Randy Stebe, left, and Andy Staudt, former commander of American Legion Post No. 14, prepare to place an American flag on a lamp post along Minnesota Ave. NW on Thursday evening in downtown Bemidji.

# Raising flags to honor the fallen

Ralph Gracie Post puts up American flags in downtown Bemidji

By Annalise Braught  
abraught@bemidjipioneer.com

Volunteers from Ralph Gracie American Legion Post No. 14, along with a few of their family members, put up 120 American flags on lamp posts in downtown Bemidji on Thursday evening ahead of Memorial Day.

“It’s just one of the many things we at Ralph Gracie do as a service to our community and to honor our veterans,” said Steve Jewett, a former commander of the Ralph Gracie Post. “We will also be putting out around 1,000 flags at veteran’s graves in Greenwood Cemetery on Saturday for Memorial Day.”



# ‘A logical path to follow’

BHS grad reflects on high school music career

By Hannah Olson  
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BEMIDJI — It is pretty safe to say that anyone who has been to a Bemidji High School event in the past four years, has probably heard Ben Fagerstrom on the trombone.

The musician has filled his high school schedule with over an hour and a half of music instruction per school day — he’s involved in concert band, show choir band, jazz



Hannah Olson / Bemidji Pioneer

Ben Fagerstrom is graduating as a member of the Bemidji High School class of 2020.

band and a brass quintet. Fagerstrom is graduating as a member of the Bemidji High School Class of 2020, and reflecting back on his high school career, he is proud of himself.

Academically, he is proud of his 4.1 GPA,

which he said, “took a lot of hard work.” But he is also proud of himself for figuring out where he belongs and finding his niche, he said.

“I was really involved in music in high school, I’ve

**FAGERSTROM:** Page A5

# Roy: ‘It’s not just about me’

TrekNorth grad wants to give back

By Hannah Olson  
holson@bemidjipioneer.com

BEMIDJI — Victoria Roy loves to lead. During her time as a student at TrekNorth, she was president of the student council, president of the national honor society and president of the Bemidji Youth advisory commission.

Now, with that extra-curricular presidential experience under her belt and a myriad of honor cords to prove it — Roy is graduating as a member of TrekNorth’s Class of 2020, ready to help others.



Hannah Olson / Bemidji Pioneer

Victoria Roy is graduating as a member of TrekNorth’s Class of 2020.

She was a part of the first class of sixth-graders to enroll at TrekNorth in 2013, and she credits a lot of her success in leadership and desire to help others from service trips she attended through TrekNorth.

A service trip to the Texas border between the

United States and Mexico was most influential for her, there she saw the positive changes social workers could make in minority communities.

“Going on these trips really secured me in what I want to do,” she said.

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# Sanford officials say upcoming MNA demonstration is a negotiating move

**By Matthew Liedke**  
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BEMIDJI — The Minnesota Nurses Association is planning an informational picket outside of Sanford Health’s Bemidji facilities next week to represent employees who’re seeking protection from the coronavirus.

Sanford Health officials, though, say it’s an expected action as negotiations are underway between the provider and the MNA.

“We’re in the middle of our contract negotiations with MNA, which come around every three years,” said Joy Johnson, vice president of operations for Sanford Health of Northern Min-



Johnson

nesota. “They will usually do something like this, it’s kind of in their playbook. It’s consistent everywhere in the state.”

According to a release from the MNA, the picket will include nurses “protesting retaliation against workers who have tried to protect themselves from the coronavirus.”

The event is scheduled from 4 to 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 26. The MNA said that the event is specifically inspired by Bemidji Sanford nurse Tonya Moss, who was placed on administrative

leave for trying to arrange alternative housing for health care workers.

“When we get complaints raised about an employee, we’ll put that person on full-paid administrative leave,” Johnson said. “Then we’ll do an investigation of the complaint. It’s a way to remove the person from the situation, and gives Sanford the opportunity to investigate.”

Johnson also said Sanford is considering alternative housing. However, as the Bemidji location has not had any COVID-19 patients yet, she said it’s too early to start reaching out.

“We’ve certainly had conversations with hotels, and they’ve

been interested in providing us help at the time we might need it,” Johnson said. “But, at this point, we have not asked for any specifics from them because we don’t have any positive patients, so it’s somewhat of a non-issue.”

Additionally, Johnson said Sanford has held weekly town hall-style meetings for employees to answer questions.

In its release, MNA noted that the event is not a strike or work stoppage. No workers will leave their jobs to attend and no patient care will be affected. The program will take place outdoors and social distancing will be practiced.

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“I want to go into nursing and social work so I can help other minority communities.”

In the fall, Roy plans to attend North Dakota State University to major in social work and nursing.

“I really like learning about the human brain and human emotions and understanding why we perceive things the way we do,” she explained. “I want to help people, and be able to understand why people are feeling these ways.”

Her dream job is to be a part of a non-profit organization that helps people with physical and mental health issues, like Doctors Without Borders, she said.

To date, her proudest accomplishment is her high school graduation. She is the first of her siblings to graduate and was determined to do so to make her family proud.

“It really means a lot to me, I want to do it for my grandpa — obviously for me too — but mostly for him and my grandma,” Roy said.

She is disappointed by the lack of traditional graduation because her family won’t get to see her cross the stage in her cap and gown, she said. But, she has a positive attitude about the whole situation.

“Throughout the whole quarantine I’ve learned it’s not just about me,” she said. “I want my community to be safe and healthy, and in order to do that, we have to practice social distancing. So that puts it in perspective. Who else is going to be able to say that they graduated in a pandemic?”

In lieu of a traditional commencement ceremony, Roy and her classmates were celebrated at 6 p.m. on Friday, May 22, with a graduation vehicle procession from Bangsberg to TrekNorth via 15th Street, Norton and 24th Street. Graduates stopped and had their names announced and were handed their diploma.

Hannah Olson is a multimedia reporter for the Pioneer. She can be reached at 507-676-1101.

## UNITED WAY

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“People can call 211 and get that information and other questions they need those immediate responses to.”

When focusing on recovery, the team zeros in on how they can help people function and get them back to work. One program they recently joined is the Step Up to Sit program, which helps to coordinate sitters with families who need child-care heading into summer.

“The reality of having just one person come into your home might be a better option than bringing your child to daycare or a bigger facility where they will interact with a lot more people,” Alamano said.

So far, they have 14 sitters signed up and ready to work.

“Hopefully it can give jobs to some college and high school kids who have come back to the community and maybe don’t have their service job they were going to do,” she said. “And also to help parents get back to work by having a sitter come in.”

Their goal with the program is to fill a gap where they’ve seen a need, not to replace daycares or take away from other available programs.

“We know safety is so key right now,” she said. “Our whole goal in joining this program was to be looking forward a bit, rather than simply responding to immediate things and provide the community with another option.”

Those interested in becoming sitters or families who may need child-care can contact the United Way and they will pair people up based on coordinating schedules and specific needs. After connecting the pair, it’s up to the sitter and family to work out the details such as scheduling and pay.

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### Gifts of Hope initiatives

The United Way has also been a big player in the community Gifts of Hope Fund program, thanks to a donation of \$100,000 from Steve and Jill Hill. The funds were divided evenly between the Bemidji Alliance for the gift certificate program and the United Way for a separate program.

“With the gift card rounds that the community is aware of through the



Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

The front office windows at the United Way of Bemidji Area are decorated with paper hearts that spell out “live united.”

Bemidji Alliance, 80 businesses will benefit from that program,” Alamano said. “And there is another 20 that the United Way has gotten to work with.”

With the portion of money they received, the United Way purchased gift cards from 18 of those businesses covering categories such as groceries, restaurants, gas, clothes, hair and something fun.

“We purchased \$50,000 worth of gift cards and broke them up into \$500 gift card packages,” she said. “Then we had our partner agencies basically apply for families that are struggling — maybe they are already low-income families, but they are struggling even more now due to COVID-19.”

They plan to help out two more restaurants — Bar 209 and Dairy Queen — next week when they put on their “COVID-19 Caravan” set for May 28.

Vehicles will meet in the Sanford Center parking lot and caravan around the lake while listening to KZY 95.5 FM. Each registered participant will receive a link to a site where they can print off a free activity pack to play games during their trip around the lake. An event map will outline a Sanford Health swag pickup spot for participants to collect goodies.

“People can sign up and purchase a meal from 209 for dinner and if they complete their activity kit they get a free Dairy Queen Treatzza Pizza,” Alamano said.

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### Community involvement

“Our whole goal from start to finish has been based on meeting what our partner agencies have as gaps or needs, and that’s who we always are,” Alamano said. “For us, we feel like we are doing the same work we always do, but the need for it is so great right now there are more eyes on us. We are just proud of what we can do right now to help our community.”

Volunteering in the community has been a large aspect of one gap they have been filling. Since March 17, they have coordinated more than 500 volunteers who have worked around 2,300 volunteer hours in total. They have been helping at the Bemidji Community Food Shelf, with Ruby’s Pantry distribution and more.

In partnering with Compass Rose, they have handed out an estimated 65 activities kits for children at shelters around the area.

“We have also gotten in around 3,000 homemade face masks so far for service organizations in the school district,” Alamano said.

Their Backpack Buddies program is now serving more than 1,200 children, rather than the usual 450 they were serving before the pandemic hit.

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### Next steps

“But as we look at rebuilding that’s really what is coming next,” she said. “Rebuilding is really about sustainability, and

how we at the United Way can remain stable for our partners and our community, while also helping those partners see where they are in terms of stability.”

One thing they are looking at doing is a stress test, which Alamano explained would include financial pieces, staffing, number of people being served, what services are provided and more.

“Hopefully looking at all these things would help businesses and organizations internally, but also help us at the United Way to see what the gaps are that we can help fill,” she said. “We can see if we should be looking to bigger organizations to ask for funds, or try to mobilize more volunteers to help, or whatever the situation might be.”

She emphasized that without all of the people in the community donating and coming alongside the United Way, none of what they have been doing would have been possible.

“The big slogan for COVID-19 has been we’re in this together, but the United Way’s slogan is ‘we can do more together than any one of us can do alone’ and everything we’ve done has been such a testament to that,” Alamano said.

“We have the words ‘live united’ in paper hearts on our window right now and I just think what a time to be living united together. It’s just who we are and I’m so proud of that.”

Nikki Brink, board pres-

ident for the United Way of Bemidji Area, said she’s proud of the work they have been doing.

“I feel that the United Way is a hub,” Brink said. “It’s bringing people and organizations together. We see the impact, but what’s meaningful is hearing the stories and testimonials of the people who are benefiting from United Way’s help.”

“When you step back and look at the big picture, it’s like ‘Oh my gosh,’ so much has happened in such a short period of time to benefit so many people,” Brink said. “It’s fun to watch the community come together and rally around supporting each other. It’s not only exciting, it’s inspiring.”

Annalise Braught is the managing editor at the Pioneer. She can be reached at (218) 333-9796.

**Paul Bunyan**  
COMMUNICATIONS

**ANNUAL MEETING  
OFFICIAL NOTICE**

**CONDUCTED BY MAIL BALLOT ONLY  
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 24, 2020**

## ANNUAL MEETING MAIL BALLOT ONLY

DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE BUSINESS OF THE MEMBERS TO BE CONDUCTED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING WILL OCCUR EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH A MAIL BALLOT. ALL VOTES, TO BE COUNTED, MUST BE IN THE FORM OF THE OFFICIAL BALLOT PROVIDED BY THE COOPERATIVE. A PROPERLY COMPLETED BALLOT MUST BE RECEIVED BY THE COOPERATIVE NO LATER THAN 3:00 P.M. LOCAL BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA TIME, ON JUNE 24, 2020.

**COOP CELEBRATION CANCELLED**  
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cooperative celebration and fish fry has been cancelled.

Questions regarding the Annual Meeting by ballot can be addressed by contacting the Cooperative toll free at 1-888-586-3100.

## FAGERSTROM

From Page A1

never really been much of an athlete, so getting to my freshman year and being in show choir band was my first time being part of a team,” he explained. “I spent pretty much all of my time in band or band extracurriculars.

“My highlight of high school has definitely been show choir by far,” he added. “There’s no feeling like performing in that setting because emotions run so high.”

Fagerstrom described himself as always being a ‘hands-on’ kind of guy — he spent his childhood playing with LEGOs, working with wood and watching Mythbusters.

“I like to make things, I’ve always enjoyed being hands-on more than that ‘fancy book learning,’” he said, laughing.

Due to this, he plans to attend Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. in the fall to study mechanical engineering.

“Seeing that sort of mindset of being able to solve a problem by making something, it seemed

like a very logical path to follow,” he said.

His dream job is to work for NASA someday.

Fagerstrom is bummed he can’t roll across the commencement stage in style — in his signature Heelys — but it is what it is, he said.

“On a day-to-day level it’s either a major bummer, or I’m just in awe of how significant this event is,” he explained. “It’s like we’re living through history, in 50 years, some kid will be reading in a textbook about this pandemic and how we responded to it.”

In lieu of a traditional commencement ceremony, Fagerstrom and his classmates will be celebrated with a vehicle procession and curbside diploma pickup on Saturday, May 23. At 8:45 a.m., students will line up in their cars in the Sanford Center parking lot. At 9 a.m., a law enforcement escort will guide a procession of graduates through town, eventually ending up at Bemidji High School. Students will then drive up one at a time — never leaving their vehicles — to receive their diplomas from school board members.