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WEEKEND

A look at area girls basketball. B1.

WILLMAR, MINN.

SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 2021 - SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

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Store owner Sheila Bass, left, and lapidary artist Maggie Landsrud put mining rough through a sluice to collect gemstones Feb. 24 at West Central RockHounds in Willmar.

## EXPERIENCE THE RUSH

Gem mining is popular at West Central RockHounds of Willmar

**By Shelby Lindrud**  
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**Willmar**

It started with a rock. It may not have been the most exciting rock, but to its finder Shelia Bass, it would start a passion that has changed her life and created West Central RockHounds located in space at the Uptown Willmar mall.

**A love of rocks**

Bass' son Logan would be the first member of the family to fall in love with gem mining and rocks. After a single visit to an emerald mine in Hiddenite, North Carolina, about eight years ago, he was hooked.

"He was addicted. It was

rocks, rocks, rocks," Bass said.

Bass herself would come under the spell a year later, when she and Logan would again visit the mine. It was there Bass found her rock as she sluiced for gem stones.

"This beautiful stone appears, at least to me it was beautiful," Bass said. "That started our love of rocks."

Bass, in 2017, temporarily moved back to North Carolina, where she and her husband are originally from, to care for her ailing parents. When her family would visit every couple of months, they would continue visiting mines and gem shows, growing not only their

**MINING:** Page A9



West Central RockHounds owner Sheila Bass speaks Feb. 24 about her store, which is located in the Uptown Willmar mall.

## Majority of school employees vaccinated

In the past month hundreds of workers in region's schools got COVID-19 vaccine

**By Linda Vanderwerf**  
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Hundreds of school employees in west central Minnesota have received their COVID-19 vaccines in the past month. Most districts have operated with students in their buildings for much of the school year, and vaccinations should help that continue. School leaders credit their local public health departments with making vaccines available. Comments in national news about reopening schools mostly apply to schools in large cities.



When COVID-19 case numbers soared last fall, many school districts shifted to distance learning for a time. When cases fell in the new year, they returned to in-person classes, either part-time or full-time.

In some cases, staff members' illness or exposure to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 have caused short-term building closures.

Benson Schools have been open and in person for all but about a week and a half, Superintendent Dennis Laumeyer said this week.

With recent construction providing additional space, the district has enough space to maintain social distancing with students in the buildings, he said.

**VACCINE:** Page A7



Joe Ahlquist / Forum News Service  
Memorials to George Floyd are seen at the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue, now known as George Floyd Square, Wednesday, March 3, in Minneapolis.

## The world watches Minnesota trial

'Most famous police brutality prosecution' begins March 8 in death of George Floyd

**By Nora Eckert**  
Forum News Service

Nine months ago, a nine-minute encounter rocked Minneapolis and sent shockwaves around the world. After video surfaced of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck until he lost consciousness, continuing for minutes after Floyd's final words, policing practices came under intense scrutiny and racial justice protests spread across most continents.

In the coming weeks, Minnesota will once again be in the spotlight as Chauvin, a white man, is tried in the killing of Floyd, a Black man. Experts call it the most high-profile trial of a police officer in U.S. history.

Chauvin faces second-degree murder and manslaughter charges. Friday, March 5, the Minnesota Court of Appeals said a district court needs to reconsider the addition of a third-degree murder charge against the former Minneapolis officer.

The trial comes on the heels of several notorious Minnesota cases involving police killings. Former officer Jeronimo Yanez shot and killed Philando Castile, a Black man, during a 2016 traffic stop. In 2017, former officer Mohamed Noor shot and killed Justine Damond, a white woman, when she approached his police car, startling him, he said.

Yanez was acquitted of

**TRIAL:** Page A2

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BUSINESS BRIEFS

**Keop hired by Dooley's Petroleum**

SAUK CENTRE — Erica Keop started Feb. 15 as an office assistant for the Sauk Centre division of Dooley's Petroleum, based in Willmar, according to a news release from the company. Her primary responsibilities will be to perform a number of administrative support and customer service tasks to ensure efficient operations of the Sauk Centre office.

Keop has an associate degree from Alexandria Technical College in office management/legal secretary. She previously worked for FAMO Feeds, Felling Trailers and Utopia Tours.

Keop is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stout and holds a master's degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

**Lippert joins Dooley's Petroleum**

WILLMAR — Jesse Lippert started Feb. 22 as a truck shop fleet manager for Dooley's Petroleum, based in Willmar, according to a news release from the company. This position is responsible for the management of the day-to-day operations of the Dooley's truck fleet while maintaining communication with technicians, internal drivers and dispatch in regard to repairs and a formal preventative maintenance program.

Lippert has a degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and has worked for Dooley's Petroleum for over 10 years.

Lippert is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stout and holds a master's degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

— Mark Wasson

Business Briefs are compiled by West Central Tribune staff. Submissions and photos may be emailed to [business@wctrib.com](mailto:business@wctrib.com) by noon Tuesday for consideration to be published the following Saturday.

Topics such as the launch of a new business, a change in ownership or management, a new location or a significant expansion are welcome, as well as announcements about new employees or employees who have earned significant promotion. Photos may be submitted as well. Employees' continuing education, advanced certification and significant awards also may be considered for publication.



— Mark Wasson



Photos by Erica Dischino / West Central Tribune



Left: West Central RockHounds is located in the Uptown Willmar mall. Right: A gemstone found in the mining rough at West Central RockHounds is held up to the light.



Left: Various rocks are for sale at West Central RockHounds in the Uptown Willmar mall. Right: Customer Melissa Drange looks at rocks for sale Feb. 24 at West Central RockHounds in the Uptown Willmar mall.



**MINING**

From Page A1

passion for stones but also their collection of specimens.

"We started amassing all these stones. Maybe I should learn to do something with these," Bass recalled. "I started to learn how to cut and polish. I developed a line of jewelry."

Bass returned to Willmar in 2019. Within six months she would lose her job and find herself looking for the next chapter of her life. While figuring that out, she attended a craft show at the mall in Willmar, to sell her jewelry line, Transformations Designs.

"That was an eye-opening experience. Everybody who walked by would stop by and said 'I love rocks,'" Bass said.

She also learned not many people knew what went into finding those rocks and turning them into jewelry and other items. That got Bass thinking.

"It might be something to bring that gem mining experience to Minnesota," Bass said.

**Unearthing a new business**

West Central RockHounds' first location was on U.S. Highway 12, near Home State Bank. The store included a small

working mining sluice, where gemstones are uncovered by sifting mining rough — comprised of dirt and stones — in running water.

"You never know what you are going to find," Bass said.

Bass had hoped to open in April 2020, exactly the same time everything was shutting down because of the arrival of COVID-19. When she finally was able to open in May, she was thrilled by the response.

"The people that were coming in loved it, referring us to other people," Bass said. Customers were coming from as far away as St. Cloud, just to visit the store. "There is definitely something to this."

Despite the early success, Bass soon needed to make a decision; whether to close her small shop or expand it.

"I kept getting the feeling we were supposed to go big," Bass said.

Using their own savings, Bass and her husband decided to go big and started looking for a new location. She landed on mall space at Uptown Willmar, close to Kohl's and JoAnn Fabrics. It also happened to be near where she had first sold her jewelry at the mall, during that craft show.

"It felt like coming home," Bass said.

**A friendly and familiar face**

During this same time Bass would reconnect with an old friend, Maggie Landsrud. The two had originally gone to cosmetology school together, but taking different paths would find new common ground amongst the gemstones.

"She does cutting and polishing. She is a lapidary artist," Bass said.

Lapidary is work related to gemstones, such as cutting, engraving and polishing. Landsrud got into it when she started tumbling stones she found on the lake shore.

"I am a collector, but what do you do with them?" Landsrud said.

She continued to get more involved in her new art, upgrading her equipment and starting to make her own jewelry, Northern Rose Gems.

"Last year I started taking design seriously," Landsrud said.

With Landsrud aboard at the store, and with the help of family and friends, West Central RockHounds celebrated its second grand opening, in its new location, on Nov. 24.

**Discover your treasure**

As in the first store, RockHounds has a working mining sluice, only this one is bigger. It is an attention

grabber and has helped many customers discover fascinating stones and gems. The store sells different sized bags of mining rough that customers can sift through using the sluice.

"We've had some crazy stuff come out of these bags," Bass said, from rare stones to fossils and arrowheads. "We have stones from all over the world come out of these bags."

Customers can be assured that all the stones are coming from ethical mines.

"There is no slave labor or child labor involved," Bass said. "Everything is ethically sourced."

Beyond the sheer fun of literally uncovering treasure, RockHounds can also be an educational opportunity by teaching children and people of all ages about earth science, geology and geography. The business recently created education packages for group visits.

"Get them in here, get them in the water, get their hands dirty," Bass said. "Let them play with rocks."

In addition to the

mining, RockHounds sells a wide range of gem- and stone-related items including home décor, wine toppers, carved animals, coasters and individual stones and geodes. There is also the Pebble Puppy Club, a stone of the month club. The store also has a party room available for private bookings.

Bass and Landsrud also sell their own jewelry and provide lapidary services. They can help customers identify stones and create customized pieces.

"It is one of the most important aspects of what we do," Bass said. "We can clean, cut, polish, make something."

Despite the early struggles of getting the business started, Bass feels blessed and is thrilled with what has taken place. She loves interacting with her customers, creating new jewelry pieces with Landsrud and spreading her love for gem mining and rocks to as many people as she can.

"It is fun, every day is super fun," Bass said. "We have a blast."



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