

# Pine Knot

News

www.PineKnotNews.com

Friday, March 19, 2021

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Vol. 4 No. 12

## INSIDE

This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



Playoffs begin  
Page 17



Catch a sunrise  
Page 14

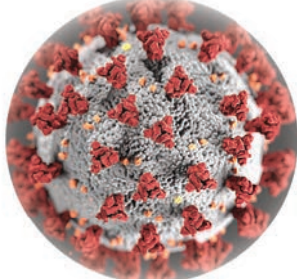


Halls fill up in Cloquet  
Page 3

## INDEX

- Weather ..... 2
- News ..... 3
- Opinion ..... 6-7
- Obituaries ..... 8
- Extra ..... 9
- Community ..... 13
- Puzzles ..... 13
- Classifieds ..... 15
- Sports ..... 17
- Insert ... Tax Notices

# A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER



# Hitting the skids on Covid

For a year I've been begging Stockholm syndrome to kick in. To get used to the Covid-19 pandemic holding us hostage. Find a groove and take it through the murky tunnel. Find that a world turned upside down isn't so bad after all. Maybe even miss it once it ends.

KNOT PINING



Mike Creger

Fat chance. If you are like me, and many people I've spoken to in the past few weeks, the light at the end of this tunnel — shown with more access to vaccinations and tumbling case rates — is reason for hope.

But I am tired. Drained. I've hit the wall. I took a few days off this month and all I did was sleep, for 12 hours at a time. Then napping, then 12 more.

A normal year provides stress enough. A pandemic year just amplifies and complicates all of it. Child care. Elder care. Relationship care. Job care. It's all so taxing. This job of newspapering, of chronicling what is happening across Carlton County, has been excruciatingly difficult amid all those personal crises.

The death stories have haunted me. Trying to keep up with hourly changes in what we can and can't and should be doing has left us simply throwing our hands up in the air some days. Staff here have had to come in contact with the public and each other more than we wanted to, especially in the peak transmission times of last spring and fall.

Many particular joys of this job have been at ebb. The big stuff of town celebrations snuffed, the little stuff gone too. All the bright things we like to sew into this Pine Knot News quilt each week have been dimmed for more than a year.

We are still journalists, of course, and we have not shied away from the duty to provide readers with vital information. If there is one thing driving us through this pandemic, it is that thrumming responsibility. It has been a chore and a pride for us.

And there has been light. I recall the story about county musicians and their friends teaming up for a video song of hope.

Continued on Page 5



### Social distancing hits region in reaction to coronavirus

Pine Knot News staff

On the same day the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus a pandemic, the NBA suspended all game play and the University of Minnesota decided to go to online classes, northern Minnesota still felt largely unaffected, with the exception of a severe lack of toilet paper and hand sanitizer.

As of Wednesday, the novel coronavirus had infected more than 120,000 people in over 100 countries, with three confirmed cases in Minnesota — Ramsey, Cloquet and Duluth.

at the college on Friday, March 6. She stressed that the college is working with the MinnState System office and said they receive information from the Centers for Disease Control and the Minnesota Department of Health and use that as guidance for operations.

Superintendents in the Cloquet and Wrenshall school districts updated their board members on preparations. Cloquet Superintendent Michael Cary said the district is being advised by both the Minnesota departments of health and education. In other matters, the schools are switching to a hospital-grade disinfectant.

### Distance order is extended

Cases in region rise

Jana Peterson  
news@PineKnotNews.com

1,154, with 39 deaths and 632 patients who had recovered and no longer contagious.

### A NEW NORMAL

Second grade teacher Aimee Aho shared this heartfelt message across the exterior windows of her classroom at Wrenshall Elementary School announced that schools will implement distance learning through May 4. Photos by Jana Peterson/Pine Knot News.

### COVID VACCINE MAKES THE ROUNDS

COVID SURGE

Caution urged as cases spike

Jana Peterson  
news@PineKnotNews.com

Covid-19 is here in greater numbers than ever before, Carlton County, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. How much worse depends on our residents and how well we look for solutions for making, social distancing, hand washing and quarantine. That's the name of the game.

### Class of 2020

The nature of graduation ceremonies this spring has taken on the surrealism of the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Celebration by automobile — to abide by social distancing guidelines — seems to be the choice of districts in the region, as it was last week in Carlton, above, and will be in Wrenshall and Ely in this issue. That's Beary Dattin walking his turn. Editor, Jana Peterson.

### A record vote ... and a smooth one

2020

While many polling places in Carlton County were busy Tuesday, a record amount of voting done across the county. As with the rest of the country, it was in-person, mail-in and absentee. Amber Heltich/Pine Knot News.



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CORONAVIRUS UPDATE

# It's not normal, but closer

MPR News  
mprnews.org

A year after they were put in place, Minnesota is easing back some of its Covid-19 restrictions, taking another step toward some semblance normalcy into the spring.

Gov. Tim Walz announced the new, more lenient restrictions March 12, citing strong vaccination progress and falling infection numbers.

Beginning this week, bars and restaurants are allowed to serve customers at 75-percent capacity. Salons, barber shops and churches won't have capacity limits at all, but will still be required to follow social distancing guidelines.

Small gatherings will be more open, as well, with groups of 50 people allowed to mingle outdoors, and groups of 15 indoors, with no limit on the number of households allowed to be represented.

"It's not over," Walz said. "We're not turning the dial all the way to 11. We are turning it up, though, to a point where normalcy is on the horizon."

Even large-event venues will expand capacity early next month — which means the Minnesota Twins will be allowed to host up to 10,000 fans at Target Field for their home opener in April.

There's a long list of specifics — and guidance

for individual circumstances and industries — on the state's website. Here's a quick overview:

- Social gatherings are expanded to allow up to 50 people outdoors and 15 people indoors — but the news here is that there is no longer a limit on how many households are allowed to participate. Social distancing between households, though, must be maintained.

- Places of worship and religious services like weddings and funerals no longer have a capacity limit, though masking and social distancing between households are still required. Food and drink also continue to be prohibited, "except when essential to perform a ritual or service." Singing will be allowed, as long as people are wearing masks.

- Businesses that provide personal services, like barber shops and tattoo parlors, no longer have a capacity limit, though social distancing is still required between groups.

- Gyms, fitness centers and indoor entertainment venues are open up to 50-percent capacity. On April 1, the current cap of 250 people will be removed. Indoor venues are subject to other capacity limits, depending on whether people are seated or moving around.

- Bars and restaurants are allowed to expand to

75-percent capacity — with a maximum of 250 people — for indoor and outdoor dining. On April 1, that 250-maximum cap drops. Patrons will still be required to be seated; tables must still be set six feet apart; bar seating continues to be limited to groups of four and table seating will still be limited to groups of six. And bars and restaurants must still be closed by 11 p.m., and can't reopen till 4 a.m.

- Larger outdoor venues, like Target Field, can open at 50-percent capacity, with a cap of 250 people. But by April 1, that capacity will be significantly increased, depending on whether people at the venue are seated — as in a stadium — or not. Social distancing and masks are still required, and venues will be prohibited from serving food or beverages between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m.

- The state has also outlined its updated guidelines for pools, swim parks, youth sports, reception spaces, large private events and working from home, which are in effect now or on April 1.

State health officials said they'll be watching infection rates — and will be tracking variants of the virus — closely over the next few weeks. If those rates continue to fall, Walz said he thinks it will be possible to ease restrictions further.

## Covid skids ...

Continued from previous Page 1

The video splashed onto the internet as part of the "Song From the North Country" project. My toddler heard it a few times while I was prepping to interview producer Timothy Soden-Groves and others involved. She's a quick study, and soon the 2-year-old was singing the song acapella while going about her days.

On a nice summer evening, we strolled in Canal Park and came upon one of the musicians from the video performing an outdoor show. My daughter recognized her while dancing wildly out of synch to the folk tunes. During a break, she started singing that internet song. We approached the musician and I tried to explain — wondered if she would mind playing a bit of the song so a proud dad could show off his kid's talent. There was a little expected befuddlement. Then I simply asked my daughter to sing it. She demurred, of course. Dads should know better than to put a kid on the spot like that.

I slinked away while the kid skipped along.

A wry but bright memory. The kind that are quite the salve at just the right time.

When we asked for submissions from readers that might define in even the smallest way this year of all years, I didn't expect a flood. It's a big ask with so much swirling through us. But what we did receive was nice. Those minute things that help us cope.

Still, I am so mentally sapped. So ready for the simple act of lying on one's back in the grass and watching fireworks, or just fireflies, in a public park with no worry about distancing. Join with friends and strangers in the mixer called normal life.

I know you are ready as well. I try to muster pep talks to myself. And I feel a need to offer a public one as well to you, dear readers. But I can't. We are all in the same boat, rowing with noodle arms. Wits' end.

I have appreciated some bits of advice offered in the past year by people far more versed than I on the psychology we've experienced while pandemic living. It isn't cabin fever. And it certainly isn't something we should obligate ourselves to conquer. It's going to get all of us at



This now 3-year-old sings "Flood Waters" a lot. She goes down to bridges all the time, like the blue bridge in Duluth's Canal Park. The song's lyrics include: "Don't go down by the bridge. Stay up high on the ridge. Don't let those flood waters carry you away." *Mike Creger / Pine Knot News*

different times, the experts warned. The key is to not think you have to achieve something superhuman despite the seeming time on our hands created by no longer being part of a social world.

If you didn't write that great American novel, deep clean a closet, write letters like it was 1820, catch on to communicating virtually, make someone's day more often, or just stay positive the past 365 days ... it's OK.

Sometimes we just shut down under overwhelming things. Breathe.

It will take time. Think of the Great Depression's impact on a generation, or world wars, or the 1918 fire and influenza outbreak. We take a big hit emotionally and shouldn't think we can just snap back.

At least I don't feel that way.

There will be normal, I know. But that will take more time than we'd like to admit, even when the last vaccine is injected or Covid-19 case is reported.

We go forward, things always do.

To avoid overthinking, I've turned to close listening of music lyrics the past year. Finding some new places they may take me.

That song from the "North Country" group is "Flood Waters," by Kate and Bill Isles. My child's continued singing of it every now and then reminds me to hold fast.

"There's a song you used to sing, before you lost everything. Don't let the flood waters take your song away." *Mike Creger is a reporter and copy editor for the Pine Knot News.*

# Covid relief brings millions to area

Jana Peterson  
jnews@pineknotnews.com

The \$1.9 trillion stimulus package passed last week by Congress and President Biden isn't only sending \$1,400 checks to many middle- to lower-income Americans, it also includes \$360 billion for state and local governments that have had to cut services due to budget shortfalls during the pandemic. Minnesota is expected to receive \$4.72 billion, with \$2.6 billion going directly to the state and \$2.1 billion going to local governments statewide. Another \$20 billion will be sent to tribal governments across the country.

Cloquet city administrator Tim Peterson updated Cloquet city council members during Tuesday's meeting, revealing that preliminary estimates show that the City of Cloquet would receive \$1.37 million dollars, with half received initially and half paid 12 months following receipt of the first payment.

This third round of stimulus is better in some ways for local government, he said.

"Many of the previous rules for this funding have been tweaked to better suit the needs of communi-

ties, residents and local businesses," Peterson told the Pine Knot News. "Utilizing funds for lost revenue opens up the funding received to reimburse lost sales tax and tourism tax dollars, and opens the possibility of addressing concerns local businesses have shared during the pandemic."

The period for submitting expenditures is much longer — Dec. 31, 2024 — than for previous Covid stimulus packages. "[That] allows the city time to review and decide a best strategy moving forward and address the long-term needs of the city, residents, and local businesses," Peterson said.

Carlton County Economic Development director Mary Finnegan said the county expects to receive just under \$7 million in two equal payments from the American Relief Plan: the first in mid-May and the second in March 2022. She said the county is still waiting to find out more about the terms of the stimulus package. Another round of business and non-profit grants could be forthcoming, the county EDA's Brenda Nyberg said last week.

Peterson said city staff would be putting together a list of suggested priorities and would be looking for

suggestions from the council in the coming weeks and months.

"Obviously this positive news is very recent, so we will be working very hard in the coming days and weeks to ensure we utilize these funds according to the laws and needs of our community," he said.

Individual stimulus checks are already being deposited in bank accounts around the country.

The IRS delayed the tax filing deadline by a month this week. The new deadline will be May 17.

With the original April 15 deadline less than a month away, there have been numerous last-minute changes to the tax laws because of the relief bill. One big change made the first \$10,200 in unemployment insurance collected in 2020 tax-exempt for many recipients.

The IRS had been under pressure to move the filing deadline by taxpayers and accountants.

Last year, the filing date was pushed back to July because of the coronavirus pandemic. The IRS, which has seen its budgets cut by Congress and its staff reduced in recent years, is still processing millions of paper returns from that year.

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# Newspaper people can certainly dream big

Jana and I were doing the math. It's a common game to play after the awards ceremony at the annual convention that draws newspaper people in from across the state each January.

We win this, enter that, carry the one ... we could have a trophy. Someday.

That's what we kicked around last year after the ceremony that was part of the last in-person convention we can expect for a while.

Each year, the Minnesota Newspaper Association hosts what it calls the "Better Newspaper Contest." Newspapers large and small submit entries of the best writing, design, advertising and photography during the past year with the hope that a judge from another state will deem their work worthy of a first-, second- or third-place designation.

There are roughly 260 weeklies in the state, of all shapes and sizes when it comes to staff, circulation and coverage areas. A lot of them submit items to the contest. When you throw in the 23 daily papers across the state, there were 3,102 entries in 41 categories. To get top billing in a category, on average, you have to beat out nearly two dozen entries.

There is a complicated system used to assign points for each newspaper based on how it, and staff members, placed in each category. The top point-getters among daily and weekly papers get trophies and can rightfully gloat for a year about being the best paper in the state.

We had dreams last year. They were clouds in our coffee.

I've been doing that math for a long time, since I first started working at weeklies in 1993.

I've had stints at dailies peppered in since then, but it's the weeklies that really get my journalism blood going.

It's here where you always have too little staff and too much work. So you do it all. And you do it in relatively quiet desperation.

Technically, I'm a part-timer at the Pine Knot. You don't want to know the hours Jana, Rose and Ivan put in each week to produce what you're reading right now.

Our profession has taken a beating in the past — oh, my — two decades or so. And while weekly papers, if they have a strong base of support, have been able to weather the storms, our work can be very isolating. We spend a lot of time working in the community and at our office.

But we have too few precious moments to talk about our work, our craft, with like minds.

The annual convention is a chance to do that, to see what others crawling out of their offices are experiencing. The conversations are always filled with knowing head bobs and much consoling.

The awards mean a lot. It means your peers see your work and recognize quality journalism.

It's great to have this once a year. A breather. A chance to bask, if only for a few days.

Of course, none of that was possible this year under the lingering pandemic. So we watched a recorded ceremony online last Thursday, a scrolling list of state newspapers and what they had won in the contest. The newspaper association tells you a month or so in advance that "you've won" but offers no details. So, while we knew we had won a lot of awards, we didn't know what they were for or where we placed.

We've talked to more than a few people in the business the past week, fellow followers of the contest each year, and most said they'd never heard of a paper getting more than 30 awards in one year. I recall that only a few years ago, papers would win with just a third that many awards. The number of papers has shrunk, to be sure, and perhaps the number

of those submitting to the contest has contracted.

No matter. That the Pine Knot received 33 awards is, frankly, gleefully obscene. We swept whole categories. We won 15 first places, including the big-points and big-deal category of "General Excellence" and, just as important, a feast of reporting wins.

There was little need to quibble about the math. Last year's winner of the Mills Trophy, the Echo Press in Alexandria, did it with 30 awards. They had that many again this year, and we just outpaced them.

Funny enough, Jana and I talked very little about hardware prospects before last week's announcement. I think we both had jinxing it on our minds simultaneously.

It's still difficult to wrap my head around the fact that our little paper has won one of the biggest journalism prizes in the state of Minnesota. And in case you didn't know, our state is known for professional standards unequalled anywhere in the country. It's a big deal. And I am honored.

The Pine Knot story isn't a typical one for the industry these days. While newspapers are slipping into the abyss and news deserts are left in the wake of that loss, that wasn't the case here. Simply, a group of people who

thought this part of the county deserved a more local approach to news decided to start up the Pine Knot. And here we are, less than three years in, and already a superstar in the newspaper ranks.

Has the Pine Knot achieved what it set out to do? Yes, sort of. There is certainly more room for subscribers and advertisers but there is no doubt that we are your community newspaper. The only one worth picking up week after week. That isn't chest thumping with intent to slight the so-called local competition. It's merely fact.

And we have 33 reasons and one trophy allowing us to say we are your best choice for news and information in this part of the world. Hell, we're the only choice.

We'll come back down to earth. We'll likely be doing that math again next year. Who knows? Can we stave off those other weeklies in the state that have quadruple the subscribers and staff and win the trophy again? Maybe.

Our focus remains on what you see on the pages each week. We are basking in the glow, for sure. It's fleeting.

Now, it's back to work.

*Mike Creger is a writer and page designer for the Pine Knot News. He can be reached at news@PineKnotNews.com.*

## GUEST COMMENTARY



Mike Creger

*Wrenshall High School students wrote editorials in Ted Conover's English composition class and a few of them shared their opinions with the Pine Knot News. We will be publishing their work over the next few weeks.*

## Struggles with Covid-19 and learning are normal

Most high school students have been "distance learning" since last March. Last school year we were sent home from school for the rest of the academic year due to rising Covid-19 cases. That being said, we only had about two months left of the semester. It was easy for teachers to post their end-of-the-year assignments and for the students to move on with our summers. No one knew we wouldn't be back on campus for the fall semester. Most teachers and students were unprepared to go back to distance learning, as everyone assumed we would be back on campus by the next school year.

Many high school students feel stressed about the amount of work they are assigned each day. "I had a job before online schooling and I could manage it with schoolwork, but after we went online I found myself struggling with getting my work done in time. I had to quit my job to keep my schedule open for my schoolwork," stated

junior Kylie Parker during an interview about her experience with distance learning. Even the smallest tasks can feel draining to complete. Being socially isolated from classmates, but still having to do the work that normally could be done as a class can make assigned work overwhelming.

I had the opportunity to ask a teacher's opinion on distance learning. Wrenshall High School teacher Mrs. Swanson observed that "The biggest challenge with distance learning is how few students are truly engaging in the process. While we have some students who are doing remarkably well, this style of teaching just does not work for many students. They need to be face-to-face with teachers. So, it's like teaching a class in which only half of the class shows up on any given day."

It's important to listen to students and understand that not everyone learns the same way. For some, online learning is easy, and they can manage their own schedule well, but some

students struggle with self-motivation when it comes to distance learning.

The main problem in many online learning models is the very little amount of student-to-student contact. Students may interact with teachers in online class meetings, but there are rarely any opportunities to talk to other students. Normally during a school day, you could talk to others during any free time given or passing time between classes. Now, the only interaction received are the greetings before the meeting and goodbyes after.

It's easy to become discouraged in times like these. Especially when school feels like a daunting task, but it's OK to take breaks and ask for help when it's needed.

*Kaya Stark is a junior at Wrenshall High School. She enjoys reading in her free time and hopes to study international relations in college. She says she chose this topic for an editorial because it's important for people to know that they're not alone with what they're feeling about school right now.*

## STUDENT VIEWS



Kaya Stark

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Protect children from river down at the park

I have sent notes to the Cloquet City Council and park board about the safety concerns at the park and playground on Dunlap Island. There is no fence to protect kids from accidentally falling into the river. We have lost people in the river either by snowmobile or just falling in. It would be a terrible situation to have a child fall into the river and nobody be able to get to them fast enough. Are we going to wait until this happens, like so many times, or are we going to get the city to put a fence along the river's edge to protect the children of our community.

*Mary Johnson,  
Cloquet*

### President Biden needs to be contained

I cannot believe how the Democrats are scrambling to undo President Trump's progress. I just heard on the news where President Biden is signing executive orders at a rate much higher than his predecessors. He is totally bypassing Congress. It is looking like a dictatorship.

We as the voting taxpayers (Democrats and Republicans) must be challenging these. Wake up, America.

*LeRoy Bergstrom,  
Cloquet*

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## INSIDE

This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



She's a rare survivor  
Page 9



Plant sale is popular  
Page 15



State meet roundup  
Page 21

## INDEX

Weather .....	2
News .....	3
Opinion .....	6
Obituaries.....	8
Culture.....	8
Health.....	9
Extra.....	11
Lands.....	15
Education.....	17
Community.....	18
Classifieds.....	19



## ANALYSIS

# Many factors driving tight labor market

Mike Creger  
news@PineKnotNews.com

We are beginning to see some of the longer-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic as life returns to normal. For many, the more precise term could be "new normal," because things are nothing like they were before the world basically shut down 16 months ago. That's especially true in the regional labor market, where a shortage of workers has many businesses struggling to get help as customers flock back to venues outside of their homes.

The literal signs are everywhere, most notably in the windows of fast food and other restaurant businesses. "Help wanted." Employers are competing for bodies, and offering signing bonuses and wages edging by necessity ever closer to the long-championed call for a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

Restaurants in the county are closing up on slower days. Owners are filling in where workers can't be found, further exasperating those in an already difficult line of work.

Continued on Page 4



"Help wanted" signs can be found at virtually every retail and restaurant business in the area, including this one at SuperOne Foods in Cloquet. Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News

## HEAT BRINGS EARLY BERRIES



Jane and John Fisher-Merritt pick strawberries at Spectrum Farm in southeast Carlton County Wednesday. Picking opened at a few county farms this week. Look in today's **Extra** section, beginning on **Page 11**, for all you need to know about what can be described as an early berry season. Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News

# Carlton, Wrenshall deal won't happen

Mike Creger  
news@PineKnotNews.com

Consolidation between the Carlton and Wrenshall school districts is no longer on pause. It's dead. The Carlton school board on Monday voted to remove consolidation from its list of future options for the founding district. Left on the list are two expensive options for district residents: turning the South Terrace elementary into a preK-8 school and releasing high schoolers to another district, or creating a new preK-12 school at South Terrace.

While the Carlton board plans to conduct a \$10,000 survey of residents about preferences for the future, consolidation will not be mentioned in the survey.

The board went through the three scenarios in separate votes. Consolidation with Wrenshall came up first, with Ann Gustafson making a motion to keep it in the list of options. The motion failed to get a second and failed. The other two district configurations passed with just Gustafson objecting to each one.

In essence, the vote on Monday all but assured that the future for Carlton students won't include attending high school there. Creating a pre-K-12 school would cost more than \$34 million with taxpayers with a home valued at \$150,000 paying more than \$500 a year.

Continued on Page 16



Disabled American Veterans & Auxiliary Chapter 18 Carlton County

# BURGERS & BRATS

## Thursday & Friday, July 1 & 2

9 a.m. - 6 p.m. ~ In the Premiere Theatres parking lot by L&M  
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# Thrift store serves area on many levels

Madison Hunter  
staff@pineknotnews.com

There's a new thrift store in town, but there's a lot more going on than resale at this store. Located at 901 Cloquet Ave., Northern Lights Community Action provides secondhand clothes, furniture, kitchenware and many other essentials. They also provide jobs, and vocational training for people with disabilities.

Northern Lights Community Action was started by Heather Wright. Wright is also the president of NorthStar Community Services, a nonprofit organization in Cloquet.

The idea for the thrift store came to Wright about a year and a half ago, according to Ashley Hanhela, designated coordinator at NorthStar and Wright's second-in-command.

"We didn't have anything to offer our community for resources, such as cheaper things for people like furniture and clothing and since Salvation Army went [and Goodwill before that], we thought 'where can we look to help and benefit our community?'" Hanhela said.

Northern Lights Community Action is a little different than the average thrift store. They work with NorthStar Community Services and its employment services to employ people with disabilities. These clients work with a job coach who shadows them and is there in case they need any help.

Store manager Alyssa Wentz thinks the thrift store has been a positive influence on the people who work there.

"All our clients really enjoy working here," Wentz said. "A lot of them, their favorite thing to do is shop after their shift."

Wentz also said the job coaches have a very positive influence on their clients, and a lot of them become a part of their friendship circle, making the clients excited to come to work.

"Having a job coach helps clients gain independence and the ability to work on their own," Wentz said.

The store employs about 12 to 15 people and every client has a job coach. Hanhela thinks the store has been very successful, above and beyond the joy of having a good-sized and well-organized thrift store in town again.

"It's going to help a lot of people, not even just the regular population but the people we employ," Hanhela said, "I just see the store helping our community, because we have been very busy since we opened June 1."

NorthStar Community Services doesn't just provide employment for their clients. They also have five residential properties for clients who need housing. The housing varies, depending on the needs of the clients: some with four clients living together and some with just one client who needs extra care and attention.



Ashley Hanhela stands in front of the new Northern Lights thrift store she helps run at 901 Cloquet Ave. in Cloquet. Hanhela also runs all the residential community-based services for NorthStar Community Services. *Madison Hunter / Pine Knot News*

They also provide in-home family support, a community based service where they help with homemaking services, bringing people out into the community, and helping teach life skills.

Hanhela and Wright hope to expand the thrift store to add a client-made goods section. This will be a place for clients who make jewelry and crafts to sell their products to customers. They aren't sure when this is going to happen but they hope soon.

"The reaction from the store

opening has been positive," Hanhela said, "Facebook and social media are filled with people wondering where to locate us, where to bring donations, and just general excitement."

The store has gained plenty of donations and customers since it opened almost a month ago. So far, they have no problem keeping the shelves stocked.

The pricing is simple. Each item has a colored sticker and each color has its own price. Red stickers are 25 cents, green is 50

cents, pink is \$1, blue is \$2, yellow is \$5, orange is \$10, \$20-plus dollars or ask an associate.

To donate, drop items off in the donation barn located on the west side of the former hardware store at 901 Cloquet Ave. or ask inside the store. For more information, visit their Facebook page or call the store at 218-626-5175. Store hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

## Labor ...

*Continued from Page 1*

The prevailing notion early on in the crawl out of the pandemic has been that continued emergency unemployment payments have kept people who might be working at home. Conversations with business owners around Cloquet and other parts of the county, as well as some lawmakers in St. Paul, are peppered with complaints about federal and state aid getting in the way of conducting business.

Those who study economics can't say for sure whether this line of thought has any merit. They don't deal in psychology and can only hint at workforce motivations. There is anecdotal evidence — individual cases where people chose not to work for a time because they made more money through weekly unemployment compensation.

But there are some numbers that would seem to indicate that more is going on than people not working to simply collect benefits.

Carson Gorecki, the northeast regional analyst for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, provided some context for what is going on.

In short, there was a demand for more workers in the region around Duluth well before the pandemic. Teen participation in the labor market has been flat

for at least two decades. Baby boomers who have often filled gaps in the market in recent years are older, and naturally dropping out of the workforce.

Since the pandemic, numbers are showing a lot of volatility in the labor force. People aren't necessarily moving upward, to more pay or benefits, but often laterally to a job that better suits a work and life balance. There simply aren't enough workers, and those that are in the market have options.

### Lack of workers

Gorecki said the Carlton County unemployment rate in April was 5.0 percent, lower than it was in February of 2020, just before the pandemic. It simply is a "tight labor force," he said. "Demand for workers remains very high, as it did before the pandemic."

Earlier this month, Steve Schulstrom stood in a strawberry field at Spectrum Farm in Blackhoof Township. It was a beautiful morning and his crew had just come out for weeding and other preparation for a season that was rapidly approaching. He got a core of workers to return but was struggling to get enough new workers. He looked at a half-weeded plot and wondered how all the work would get done. "It's been super-hard to find people," he said.

His partner, Rita Vavrosky, has a theory, he said. People have been cooped up for more than a

year under pandemic restrictions and are now making a "binary choice — fun versus not fun," or work or not work.

Schulstrom remains puzzled. Work on the farm is fun in his eyes, and the picking season is a "big party" for his staff as they welcome pickers. He raised wages for his returning workers and bumped his starting wage as well.

He isn't alone. The City of Cloquet usually has little trouble finding people for its seasonal parks crew, another mostly outdoor endeavor with no nights or weekend work. But it had to raise pay a few dollars to \$13 and go without some positions filled early this season.

At the Food Farm in Wrenshall, Janaki Fisher-Merritt has his theories on the labor market as well, although he has been lucky to retain most of his employees over the years. He thinks the pandemic has caused more people to reflect on what they do, and whether it has value for them. He has two new employees in his crew of nine, but got an early jump on hiring this winter to prepare for the growing season at the community supported agriculture vegetable farm.

Adding to the whipsaw of why the labor market might be so tight, Fisher-Merritt credits his fortunes to outside work. "Maybe more people are reluctant to work inside," he said.

He also says there is a lot of "buy in" in the farm work environment, especially as they

worked through the heart of the pandemic last year. They figured out how to navigate, he said, "creating a work environment together."

Dan Lundquist is always looking for workers, but Gordy's Hi-Hat in Cloquet has also proven to be a bit labor market-proof. The popular seasonal restaurant, open during spring and summer only, has employees that tend to come back year after year. Lundquist said he is "fortunate" and in a "good position" after hiring a regular crop of newcomers to mix with the veterans. He is optimistic that the market will settle down for other employers as well.

### Life choices

The U.S. Labor Department recently reported a mass exodus of workers from retail jobs. Millions of people across the country are re-evaluating where they work. The Washington Post reported this week on the Labor numbers and interviewed several retail workers who have left their jobs. They said the pandemic "introduced new strains to already challenging work: longer hours, understaffed stores, unruly customers and even pay cuts," the newspaper reported.

Julia Pollak, a labor economist for the site ZipRecruiter, told the Post it's a matter of choice, especially in traditionally low-paying jobs in hospitality and retail sectors. "In a tight labor market, we often see big shifts among

workers with low earnings," she said. "If you're making \$12 an hour and there's a job down the street offering \$12.50, why not jump? There's no reason not to — which is what's happening now."

It's not a free-for-all yet, Gorecki said of at least the Minnesota market. He cites a report showing that just 6 percent of hospitality industry workers claiming unemployment insurance last year actually switched industries this year. About 60 percent returned to the employer that laid them off, he said. There is "friction" in the market because statewide, many of the lowest-paid workers who haven't been recalled are indeed filing benefit claims for longer stretches rather than face the task of retraining for another industry.

"This friction may be playing a factor in the hiring difficulties of many employers as many workers are offered a rare opportunity to consider the switch," Gorecki said.

Businesses hoping to beat the labor shortfall will likely have to provide more incentives and better starting pay. It's happening across regions. But employers are facing other challenges as well. Supply chains have been rattled by the pandemic and the cost of doing business has gone up beyond paying employees more.

In the end, many factors are roiling the labor market, and it will likely continue that way until the pandemic is long gone from the rearview mirror.