

Rising above alcoholism

DWI court graduation is latest milestone in inspirational story

By Michael Achterling
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The judge overseeing the proceedings was moved to tears. "You have been, and you can be, a role model for others that are struggling with addition," the judge said.

Her sobriety journey has been more than three years in the making and her family, and friends, were all on hand to witness a moment, some believed, would never come.

During a virtual meeting of Becker County and White Earth, DWI court on Thursday, Feb. 11, Tara Griess, 39, of Rochert, graduated her treatment-based probation program after nearly two years.

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Tara Griess, left, talks with Stefanie Hurt, regional program manager for MADD, after graduating from a treatment-based probation program for alcoholism.

Michael Achterling / Tribune

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Becker opts out of watershed plan

Vote risks county's 'seat at the table' on water issues

By Nathan Bowe
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Becker County has rejected, at least for now, an ambitious state plan to fund water projects based on the geographic boundaries of river watersheds.

Take the happy little Otter Tail River, for example. It starts with a trickle in southwestern Clearwater County and ends with a torrent where it joins the Bois de Sioux to launch the Red River in Breckenridge.

Most of the Otter Tail's watershed (basically the river's drainage area) is in Becker and Otter Tail counties, stretching from the Cormorant

lakes to Otter Tail Lake and beyond, and including the Pelican River.

Replacing a hit or miss system

Until now, water projects — things like erosion control, wetland restoration, aquifer replenishing, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, keeping phosphorus out of lakes, and the like — have been handled largely by soil and water conservation districts, watershed districts, and counties, each with their own state-approved water plan.

But it's been kind of a hit or miss system: Enticements like the Becker Soil

and Water Conservation District, that excel at grant writing and have a good reputation with state water-regulatory agencies, have done pretty well at landing state funding for their projects. Others, not so well.

The idea behind One Watershed, One Plan is to provide a reliable flow of funding (from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council) distributed fairly to river watersheds across the state.

But it also turns the existing system on its head. Now, Becker County commissioners, for example, have five new watershed

areas to help administer, since the county has five river basins within its boundaries: The Otter Tail in the south-central, the Buffalo-Red in the west-central, the Wild Rice-Marsh in the north-central, the Crow Wing in the east and a little bit of the Redeye in the southeast corner.

The same is true for board members on the Becker Soil and Water Conservation District, since conservation districts pretty much follow county lines, except in a few big counties like Otter Tail, which has an east and a west SWCD.

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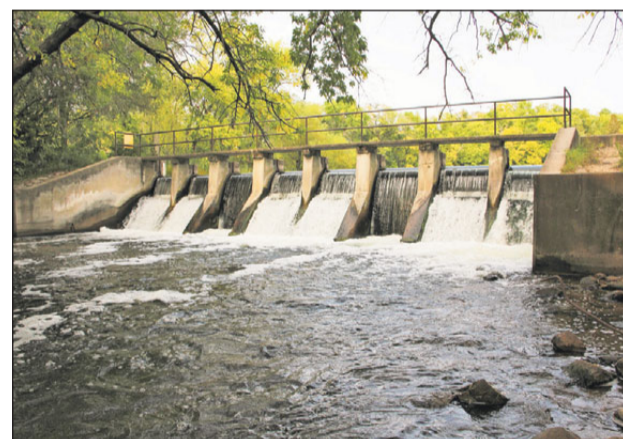
County moves forward on Bucks Mill project

By Nathan Bowe
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It may seem like a small thing, a minnow in the lake of news, that Becker County landed a \$26,225 grant to help reroute the Pelican River to bypass the Bucks Mill Dam.

But with that DNR grant, the county will be able to buy a piece of land, about 1½ acres, from willing private sellers. And that piece of land, added to the DNR-owned land in the area, will allow the bigger, sturgeon-sized project to proceed.

In the end, the most comprehensive plan envisions putting the Pelican River back in its ancestral bed, and using rock arch rapids to maintain the current



Michael Achterling / Tribune

Water flows over the Bucks Mill dam along the Pelican River. Minnesota DNR officials are seeking to remove or bypass the dam to return the Pelican River to its ancestral streambed, which would benefit the natural ecosystems of nearby rivers, lakes and streams.

water level of the lakes on the Pelican River chain, said Nicholas Kludt, Red River fish-

eries specialist with the Minnesota DNR.

Even if the river isn't returned to its ancestral

bed, the dam will either be bypassed or removed to allow fish to move up and down the river via rock arch rapids.

The river was rerouted in the late 1800s when the original dam was built by the Bucks family, Kludt said. It was replaced by the existing dam, which was built upstream in 1937.

From the air, the ancestral riverbed looks like wetlands, running about 50 yards from the existing river. And that streambed could be restored, now that the county can start the purchasing process for that 1½-acre plot of land. The DNR already owns the rest of the land needed for the project.

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Vaccine side effects give people pause

Essentia doctor says awareness, planning key

By Marie Johnson
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As more people receive COVID-19 vaccines, more stories are going around about the unpleasant side effects some of those people are experiencing — and that's causing others to have second thoughts about whether or not to get vaccinated.

In a survey published this week by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, roughly 1 in 3 people polled said they will definitely or probably not receive the inoculation, mostly because of distrust and concerns about side effects.

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GRIESS

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Tara Griess, center, talks with family and friends on Thursday, Feb. 11, after graduating from a treatment-based probation program for alcoholism. Through the program, Griess became the new panel coordinator for the Becker County chapter of MADD.

Since deciding to give up alcohol, Griess has kept up her sobriety for two years, two months and three days, and has had zero violations of her treatment program during that time.

In fact, she did so well during her rehabilitation that the Becker County Mothers Against Drunk Driving made her the new panel program coordinator. Griess will help facilitate future panel discussions and hopes to open up the process so members of the public can hear their stories of addiction in a hope they can offer help to someone who needs it.

"I'm really emotional about all of this," Griess said, during the proceedings. "I feel overwhelming gratitude for the incredible people who have supported me along this sobriety journey."

Fighting through tears, Griess continued: "I cannot begin to express how remarkable it feels to finally love who I am, enough to pursue my authentic self, who I used to be in the past. Now, I can be that person. I can be happy, and everybody around me can be happy, and not have to worry about me out drinking, or using drugs, or whatever. I'm just very grateful, and thankful, that this program was available because I don't think I would have survived in prison, or things would've been different

when I got out."

The Becker County MADD panel program didn't exist in February when Griess began her treatment regiment. However, as the story-sharing panels expanded, her story resonated with attendees and became a powerful lesson in asking for help after hitting a final breaking point.

Griess grew up in Clara City, a small town southwest of Willmar. She played basketball through high school and continued playing into college. However, college is also where she started drinking heavily on the weekends. Griess received her first DUI while living in North Dakota in 2006.

"Nothing happened for that one," she said.

"It was pretty much a slap on the wrist, so my drinking continued."

She moved back home to Clara City and met up with old friends while continuing to binge drink.

On a night like any other in 2011, Griess said she was bar hopping with a friend. While she was driving them to the next pub, her car was T-boned by a semi-truck.

The truck hit Griess on her driver's side, which caused her to suffer 22 broken ribs, collapsed lungs and a lacerated liver. In her first week in the ICU, she needed to be shocked back to life after flat lining, which compounded her rib injuries due to the chest compressions. Griess would spend almost three months in

the hospital recovering from her injuries.

She was charged with criminal vehicular operation due to the additional injuries suffered by her passenger; two broken ribs and other various injuries. Griess spent 14 days in jail and lost her driver's license for the next two years.

In 2015, she married her husband, Brad Griess, and the couple moved to Becker County. Brad worked for the railroad and was gone for long stretches of time, which left Tara with less social connections and a lot of time to herself.

"I didn't have any friends up here, so what do I do? I go into the bar," she said.

Griess said she made friends at her favorite

bar in Detroit Lakes and she would day drink while waiting for her friends to get off work so they could then continue partying, which led to another encounter with law enforcement.

"Two years ago, I got pulled over on my way home," she said. "I was going 81 m.p.h. ... I got pulled over and I spent the weekend in Becker County (jail)."

During her weekend in jail, Griess said she swore to God that her days of drinking were over.

"There and then, I told God that I'm done, I've had enough," said Griess. "So I put myself in treatment at Drake Treatment Center in Detroit Lakes and I had 42 sessions (three or four months) of that, and after that was done, I started going to Alcoholics Anonymous."

She said she found a welcoming AA group in Lake Park and goes every Thursday.

"I'm kind of a role model in that group now and they think I'm an example of the big book," she said. The big book being the AA manual.

Griess was also ordered by the court to attend MADD panel discussions where individuals share their stories about addiction, which she did beginning in August 2019.

She ended up serving 56 days in Becker County jail, but was able to participate in a work-release program, which landed her a dishwashing job at her favorite bar, Roasted. Through all of this, she

continued sharing her story through the MADD panels.

"I started speaking in Moorhead, I've spoken in Willmar, I spoke in St. Cloud, and I spoke down in Granite Falls," said Griess.

She also said, during one of her DWI court dates, she even apologized to her arresting officer and thanked him for picking her up that night because it changed her life for the better.

"To see her grow from where she was to where she is now, it's amazing," said Brad Griess, Tara's husband. "Her attitude, her mental wellbeing is all changed for the better. The way she touches people with her story ... to try to get them help."

Brad said Tara is just at the beginning of this exciting new chapter and is looking forward to see where it takes her, and the both of them.

Tara's mother, Kathy Lalim, said, before Tara decided to seek treatment, she was asked how many chances she would give her daughter to straighten out.

"As many as it takes," said Lalim. "She's my child, and you give your child as many chances as it takes."

Tara Griess will be hosting a MADD panel discussion at the Holiday Inn in Detroit Lakes on March 17, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The meeting is open to the public and she said she hopes this will be the first step in a more community-oriented county MADD program.

VACCINE

From Page A1

COVID-19 CASES IN BECKER COUNTY

As of Thursday, Feb. 11, there were 54 active COVID-19 cases here — 4 more than the day before, according to Becker County Public Health.

Active cases in the county have dropped significantly since a high of nearly 400 on Nov. 26; they've been steadily hovering at or around 50 since the end of December.

Since the start of the pandemic, the county has had a total of 2,982 known cases of the virus, and 41 deaths from it.

That's troubling for health officials, who say the vaccine is safe, effective, and the only healthy way to establish herd immunity — a goal that can't be met if only 2 out of every 3 people get vaccinated. The AP's report on the survey states that somewhere between 70% and 85% of the U.S. population needs to get inoculated to stop the virus.

The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that most people who receive the federally-approved, two-dose Moderna or Pfizer coronavirus shots experience mild to moderate reactions, particularly after their second dose. Soreness at the injection site is the most common side effect; others are fatigue, chills, a headache, low-grade fever and muscle aches. Severe reactions are rare.

"The side effects are similar to what you'd expect from any other vaccine, or to getting the COVID-19 virus itself," said Dr. Richard Vetter, the chief medical officer for Essentia Health's west region, which includes Detroit Lakes and Fargo. "They're usually very mild to moderate, (and) usually only last 1 or 2 days... There are not any life-threatening side effects to

date. In fact, the risk of severe allergic reaction is only in the range of 3 to 4 per million."

Instead of avoiding getting vaccinated, he said, people can prepare themselves for it by learning about what to expect and planning for the possibility of being sick for a day or two. Side effects are simply the immune system's response to fighting an infection — they're a sign that the vaccine is working. And Vetter said vaccines do work.

Evidence from clinical trials has shown the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines to be 94% and 95% effective at preventing COVID-19 illness, respectively. The new one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine (expected to get federal emergency use authorization by the end of February) is less effective at preventing mild and moderate illness, at 65%, but is 85% effective at preventing serious illness and death — which Vetter said is the more important goal of vaccines.

"The flu vaccine is only 70% efficacious, but what it really does is, it reduces hospitalization

and death so that even if you get it, you won't get it very severely and end up in the hospital," he said. "And that's what we're striving for (with the COVID-19 vaccine), is for people, even if they do get sick, to not end up in the hospital."

Despite the apparent hesitations of a third of the population, Vetter said there are still a lot more people in this region who want to be vaccinated than there are vaccine doses to offer them.

"There is a waitlist at Essentia," he said. "The supply for the number of people that would be willing to be vaccinated at this point, I would say, is lagging the demand. I think there would be many more people that would be vaccinated if there were more available."

Allocations of the vaccines come from the Minnesota Department of Health. Vetter said Essentia distributes its allocations "as fairly as possible, with emphasis on rural areas and those people who are underserved, and working with public health agencies."

People who do get vac-

cine production increases and more doses become available, "that will allow us to vaccinate people at a much faster pace. You'll see a continued ramp-up...as we continue to get down to the next tier (of people eligible for vaccination)."

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