

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

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The Forum

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MUSICAL MEMORIAL

Mary Stockeland, in final stages of her fight with colon cancer, died just hours before seeing her favorite Elvis tribute artist

Robin Huebner reports



Cooperstown, N.D.

Elvis' put on a two-hour show for the people of this northeastern North Dakota town, but a seat front and center of the stage was conspicuously empty. Mary Stockeland, 66, and a lifelong Elvis fan was supposed to see Joseph Hall, her favorite Elvis tribute artist and finalist on the TV show "America's Got Talent," perform in her hometown on Sunday, Aug. 22. In the final stages of a fight with colon cancer, she was too sick to travel to Hall's closest show in Mitchell, S.D., on Saturday, so he decided to bring the road show to her the next day.

The event went forward as planned but without its guest of honor.

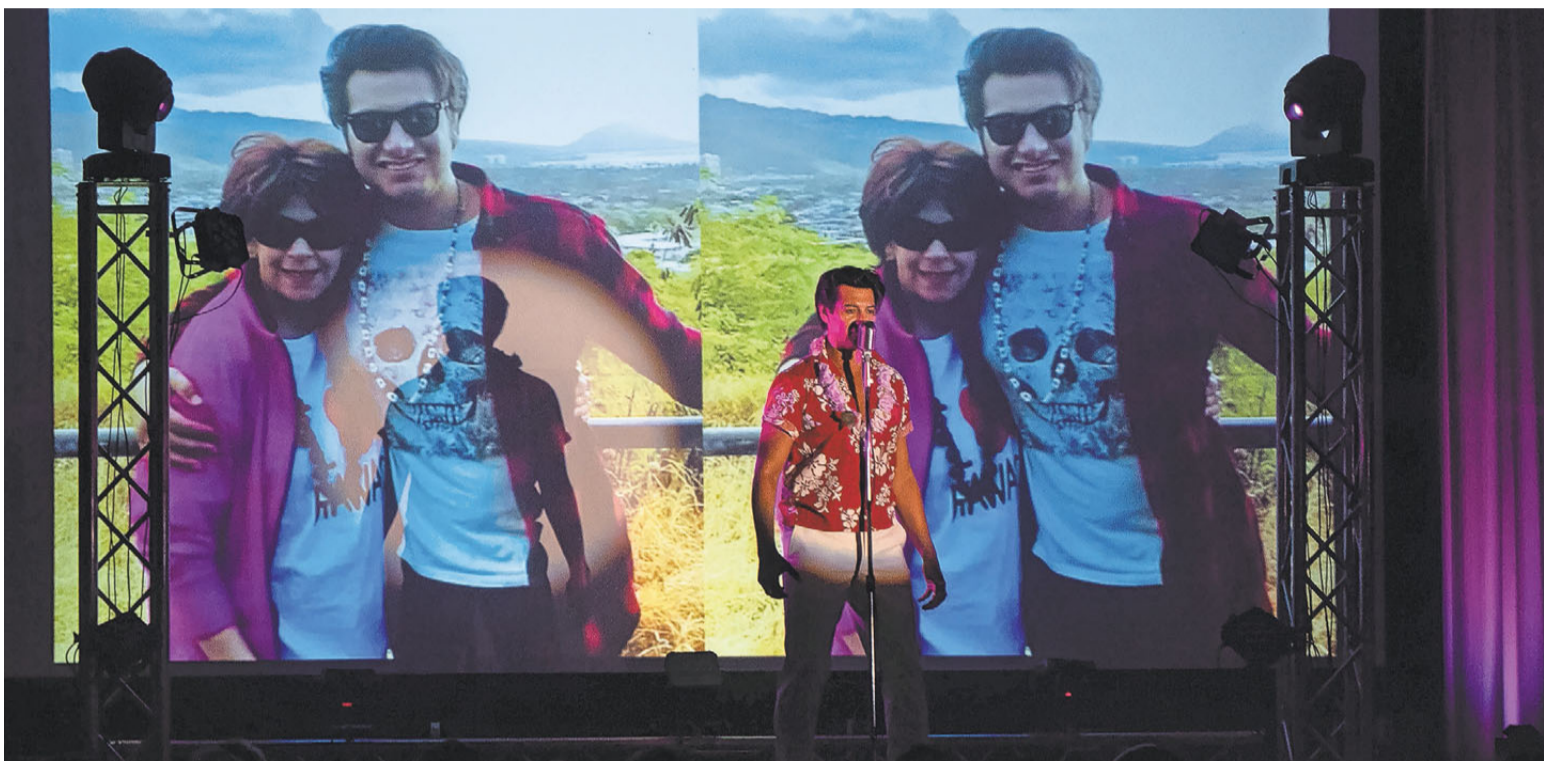
Mary Stockeland died in her home just hours before, surrounded by family and close friends.

In daughter Ashley Stockeland's mind, a local pastor's wife said it best... that only Mary could have arranged for 'Elvis' to be at her celebration of life.

"We wanted her here one more day. That was not God's will, so here we are," Ashley Stockeland said.

On Aug. 11, Mary Stockeland told The Forum it was hard to believe Hall was coming to Cooperstown for her.

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Above: Joseph Hall, an Elvis Tribute artist performed in Cooperstown, N.D. on Sunday. Left: Mary Stockeland of Cooperstown is shown holding her favorite Elvis memorabilia and wearing a signed scarf from Elvis tribute artist Joseph Hall on Aug. 11.

Photos by Chris Flynn / The Forum

'Get a life preserver in there'

3 departed county prosecutors say staff is buckling under stress, poor morale

By C.S. Hagen
The Forum

The Cass County State's Attorney's Office during the last year has lost three notable prosecutors who say they left under unhappy circumstances or because of a toxic work environment.

Two years earlier, a receptionist who worked in the office for more than 21 years said she departed due in part to bullying inside the office, according to her personnel file.

A total of 19 personnel files and exit interviews obtained by The Forum upon request showed four employees had negative reviews about the Cass County State's Attorney's Office.

Most employees left due to retirement or took a different job in another law firm or office.

Cass County State's Attorney Birch Burdick said the job comes with high levels of stress and increasingly heavy case-loads due to a recent and significant rise in violent crimes.

"I like each of these people, and I wish them well. That is the way I feel about these people,

their comments notwithstanding," Burdick said.

In performance reviews, all the attorneys who left or were fired were described repeatedly as "passionate," "extraordinary" and doing "important work."

Leah Viste, a 20-plus-year veteran prosecutor, was fired on Aug. 4, 2020, after she disclosed having a personal relationship with a witness.

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Forum file photo

Leah Viste answers questions after the sentencing of Brooke Lynn Crews in Cass County District Court on Feb. 2, 2018, for conspiring to murder Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind.

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81°
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LIFE:
ND artists ready to premiere road trip-inspired film.
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Fargo high school students want less homework, more therapy

Mental health a top concern in student, community surveys

By Barry Amundson
The Forum

FARGO — With the start of school just around the corner, a survey of about 450 Fargo high school students has found that reducing homework was the top solution at the lowest cost to help teenagers' mental health.

Erika Spanjer, a Fargo North High School senior and chairman of

the city's Fargo Youth Initiative, said students are well aware of mental health issues as 60% said they personally experienced difficulties. Another 25% said they knew a friend or family member who was dealing with issues on a regular basis.

"That's pretty alarming," Spanjer said.

The survey also found 33% didn't have knowledge of where they could go for help, 30% felt they didn't have the finances to seek therapy and 25% didn't have

transportation to get to appointments.

It's not just the student survey that is showing mental health issues are a top concern in the community. A recent needs assessment of more than 1,000 residents by Fargo Cass Public Health that's done every three years found mental health was the third-highest concern in the community, behind only access to health care and physical activity and nutrition needs, according to Fargo Cass Public

Health Analyst Justin Bohrer.

Spanjer said the survey covered the city's three public high schools as well as Shanley High School.

She made presentations to school and city leaders highlighting results of both surveys in hopes of making connections that can help lead to change.

Perhaps, she said, her group could talk to school leaders about homework overload.

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CASS COUNTY

From Page A1

Viste led the prosecution of Brooke Lynn Crews and William Henry Hoehn in connection to the August 2017 death of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind.

Tracy Hines, who was hired in September 2017, left her job on June 25, saying she could no longer work in a toxic environment and be treated like a nonexempt employee.

Hines was also involved in high-profile cases such as the prosecution of Ginny Rose Lubitz, who was found guilty in 2020 of drowning her newborn son in a bathtub. Lubitz is serving a 20-year sentence.

Tanya Martinez, who spent nearly 14 years with the Cass County State's Attorney's Office, was a prosecutor involved in high-profile cases such as the 2019 shooting death of Texas Q BBQ and Catering owner Jason "Jay" Halvorson.

Citing health reasons, Martinez quit her job on July 29, according to a Facebook post.

Martinez's exit interview reveals that a health issue wasn't the only reason she left the office. Other reasons she wrote about in her exit interview included a poorly managed work environment, internal strife, "backdoor gaslighting" and an understaffed office.

"I hope that my parting resignation email accomplishes one thing: get a life preserver in there. Please. One employee has expressed suicidal thoughts to me. I won't 'out' this person. But I would swear under oath it happened... Please get my work family help. Birch is a good man. He just does not see the deterioration in the mental health of the office," Martinez wrote in part of her exit interview on Aug. 5.

"It didn't have to be like this. I really didn't want it to be like this. I have so enjoyed most of my time at Cass County. But being painted as persona non grata was really just the last straw," Martinez said in an email included in her personnel file.

"It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve the citizens of Cass Coun-



Prosecutor Tracy Hines makes her opening statement Jan. 8, 2020, in Cass County District Court in Fargo during the trial of Ginny Lubitz.



Tanya Martinez interviews a witness in the trial of Brooke Lynn Crews in relation to the August 2017 murder of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind.

ty; however, I am concerned about the health of the employees that remain in the State's Attorney's office," Martinez said when asked to comment. "The staffing of the office has not kept pace with our growing community and uptick in violent crimes."

Hines in her exit interview said the State's Attorney's office is a "toxic work environment that has zero trust. Working here made me very depressed," adding that the performance review process was a "popularity contest."

Hines also said in her exit interview that she could not find the time to take care of her own health needs.

"It is quite frustrating to work so hard for an office, even to the point of exhaustion, achieve justice for victims in several big cases over

the last few years, consistently have the best AR (attorney review) report on my team, and when I try to take care of myself medically, get shamed for it," Hines wrote in her exit interview.

Hines declined to comment further to The Forum on her reasons for leaving the Cass County State's Attorney's Office.

In Hines' personnel file, office leader Burdick responded to the criticism, saying he talked to other team members and that "although I believe your comments reflect exactly how you felt, I do not believe they are widely held."

Burdick stated that Hines was a capable lawyer who did important work. After receiving complaints about the department, Bur-

dick said he searches for "nuggets of truth so I can learn something."

"We try to do our best for everybody here, for all 40 people we've got here, and make the best working environment we can. And overall I think we do a good job, and not because I'm in the corner office," Burdick said, adding the office's success was due to the people who worked there.

In the past 10 years, Burdick said he has hired nine additional attorneys and, although the office could always use more, there has to be a balance between investment and return. Like any other organization, the office has policies about sick leave.

"In circumstances like ours, I'm working with taxpayer dollars and the county commissioners have been careful,

and they've been right," Burdick said. "I am sorry to lose these three (attorneys), but we have lots of good people ready to take over those cases and who are taking over those cases."

Cass and Clay counties are growing, Burdick said, and with growth comes an "additional element of criminal activity."

"Are we going to have to add people to the office? Over time, we will," he said, noting new prosecutors will be added in the upcoming months.

Viste, who now works in the prosecutor's office in Ward County, North Dakota, said she was told she could never be a team leader in Cass County because of taking sick days, "because I was absent too frequently."

"I think every office has morale issues and people feeling devalued or not recognized or not appreciated, and that existed there as well. At the same time, we're dealing with very difficult cases, so it's hard to weigh that balance when the public has to weigh in on what we're doing," she said.

"But yes, I didn't always feel like I was valued, yes. Not all the time," Viste said. "I think it would be beneficial to have consistency with how things are enacted and how people are treated across the board."

Kathy Jones, a longtime receptionist, was

fired from her job on July 18, 2019, after she was warned about repeated absences. In her exit interview, Jones explained she had been involved in multiple family emergencies and had been bullied at work.

"I was being bullied by two coworkers for over a year. I saved every email that I sent to my boss about that situation and how I would leave work and cry on my way home," Jones wrote in her exit interview.

Liz Brainard, an attorney at the Fargo public defender's office, said she worked with all three former prosecutors and found them all to be professional and approachable. She said Martinez specifically was a "worthy adversary."

Charles Sheeley of Sheeley Law, P.C. in Fargo, said he worked at the Cass County State's Attorney's Office in the late 2000s.

"It was a great working environment, but it does seem that recently there has been a shift in morale," he said.

"I worked with several of the people who left recently, and then I worked against them for the last 10 years now, so I got to know these people," Sheeley said. "All three of them gave a lot, and I know they cared a lot about the work that they did and it's just unfortunate that they had to leave under the circumstances that they did."

Mark Friese, an attorney with Vogel Law Firm, said his information about the Cass County State's Attorney's Office is second- and third-hand, but he knows the three prosecutors well, adding they were honest, skilled and committed.

"All three are exceptional prosecutors, and it was a big loss in each instance. Years of experience walked out the door," Friese said.

He also said the working climate within the prosecutor's office has changed.

"I don't know how to put my thumb on it. I don't know what is going on, Friese said. "It's a high-stress job, there's no doubt about it. It takes an emotional toll, and it's really unfortunate for our community that we lose good prosecutors."

Readers can reach Forum reporter C.S. Hagen at 701-241-5535.

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