

## VIEWS BY THE ECHO PRESS

# THUMBS UP/ THUMBS DOWN

### Weather spotters

**Thumbs Up:** Douglas County residents once again had to take shelter because of a tornado. It was the second touch-down in 18 days. Once again, we were fortunate that no serious injuries were reported. And once again, we should be very grateful to all those who respond in these horrific, emergency situations. In a previous “thumbs up,” we saluted a lot of people and agencies that help calm the chaos when severe weather hits, but there was one group we neglected to mention: The weather spotters. These are the trained firefighters and first responders who keep their eyes to the sky when bad weather threatens. They’re called out at all times of day and night. They have to drop what they are doing, go to areas where they’re needed and stay calm while reporting to the county dispatch center if they see hail, heavy rains, damaging winds, suspicious cloud formations or any other insights. Their observations help track the path of the storm and can give precious minutes for those who are at risk, giving them time to prepare for the danger ahead.

### Storm gawkers

**Thumbs Down:** On the topic of tornadoes, here’s a thumbs down to the “lookie-loos” who drive around during or immediately after a bad storm, trying to catch a glimpse of the storm damage. They typically end up clogging roads that are already difficult for emergency responders to use because of fallen trees and powerlines. Law enforcement has to waste manpower by setting up detours to keep these snoops away. In our stories about the last tornado, we shared law enforcement’s pleas for people to steer clear of tornado-damaged sites. One Facebook commenter, who had to deal with the storm gawkers after the May 12 tornado, thanked the newspaper for telling people to stay away from the storm-hit areas. “Good Lord, nothing like a parade as you try to process what the hell just happened,” she said. “Prayers to all those affected.”

### Deputy delivers kindness

**Thumbs Up:** A Forada couple came home to an unpleasant surprise on Memorial Day weekend. Someone damaged their mailbox. They called the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office and a deputy came out to see if he could help

repair the mailbox. He ended up taking the mailbox with him and came back later with a new mailbox. The couple said he told them it was so badly damaged that he got them a new one. “He was the nicest young man,” the Forada woman said. “I feel so lucky to live in this community.”

### Keeping ditches clean

**Thumbs Up:** Thousands of Adopt a Highway volunteers helped to keep Minnesota roadsides clean and free of litter in 2021 by picking up more than 29,500 bags of trash from highway ditches, according to the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Across Minnesota, over 1,500 Adopt a Highway groups volunteered their time for more than 70,000 hours collectively last year. With 830 roadway sections currently available for adoption statewide, MnDOT welcomes more groups to volunteer for this program. Groups who want to volunteer should visit MnDOT’s Adopt a Highway website to find their local program coordinator. Volunteers are asked to commit to the program for at least two years and pick up litter on both sides of their roadway section at least twice a year. The average length of an adopted roadway is two miles.

### Lake Country Meats to the rescue

**Thumbs Up:** A Garfield couple gives a big thumbs up to Lake Country Meats in Alexandria. After the May 12 storm hit, they were without power but they found out Lake Country Meats was making freezer space available to anyone who had lost electric service. As a result, they were able to bring a whole buffalo that they had recently purchased for about \$3,000 to the butcher shop. “They were so polite to us and so good,” the couple said. “We couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

### Hard working eighth-graders

**Thumbs Up:** Ann Wolff of Alexandria sends a thumbs up to the eighth-graders from Discovery Middle School who volunteered to help several senior citizens with spring cleanup by tilling gardens, washing windows etc. The effort was part of National Caring Day and helped many local residents.

If you have a suggestion for a Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down, email it to [aedenloff@echopress.com](mailto:aedenloff@echopress.com) or mail it to Echo Press, P.O. Box 549, Alexandria, MN 56308.

## LETTERS

### We need to get to the root cause of mental illness that led to shooting

**To the editor:**  
About the tragedy in Uvalde, Texas, I think we need to get to the root cause of mental illness that drives tragedies like this. The shooter was an 18-year-old high school student with what seems to be a rudderless family life. There are no indications that his father was in his life; his mother struggles with drugs; his grandparents were likely trying the best they could to raise him. He really had the cards stacked against him. Why can’t we take steps to address how he (and other teens) get to this point and help them?  
My teen years were many decades ago. My buddies and I were all raised with hunting as part of our lives. We all had ready access to weapons, but never considered taking the drastic steps this young man did. Our country needs to address how to raise young people with a well-formed conscience, understanding right from wrong, and being able to

make good decisions about how their actions affect the lives of all who are around them.

What many are proposing with increased gun control is taking a constitutionally-protected right for every U.S. citizen (in the Second Amendment) and making it a government-granted privilege (and subject to abuse by whatever political party is in power). This is not what our founding fathers intended. They included the amendment to allow us to protect ourselves from a tyrannical government that takes away our rights. These same founding fathers included the phrase, “All men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

They understood what is necessary to preserve these rights and provided the means of protecting these rights in our Constitution for both themselves and future generations.

**Mike Sponsler  
Alexandria, MN**

## Following a child’s murder, Minnesota needs to open CPS records to the public

In 2014, tears streamed down a whole bunch of faces when people read a Star Tribune special report about the death of Eric Dean.

You probably remember that Eric was the 4-year-old boy murdered in Pope County by his stepmother. Despite numerous reports to Pope County child protection that Eric was being abused, the county investigated only one, and found no maltreatment. He died in 2013 after his stepmother threw him across the room, perforating his intestine.

The circumstances of his death proved so heart wrenching that Minnesota launched an effort to overhaul its child protection system from one focused on keeping families together to one that focused on the wellbeing of the child.

Despite those efforts, there is now another child to mourn. Eli Hart, 6, whose body was found on May 20 in Orono in the trunk of his mother’s car, just weeks after a judge awarded her sole custody. His mother has been charged with second-degree murder. For the last year of his life, he had been in foster care, and those caring for him reported that they feared for his well-being if he was returned to his mother’s custody.

He was returned to her custody anyway. Why? We don’t know.

“With all the red flags, the fact that numerous people were saying they feared for Eli’s safety if he was returned to her and that was ignored,” foster



**KAREN TOLKKINEN**  
*Karen’s Turn*

mother Nikita Kronberg told FOX-9 news. “So yes, I absolutely believe CPS, Dakota County, they failed Eli.”

Minnesota’s child protection system is cloaked with secrecy. Nine years after Eric Dean died, we still don’t know why Pope County investigated only one of the 15 reports that he was being abused and why they didn’t turn abuse reports over to law enforcement as was required by law. It was just this past winter that the Minnesota Supreme Court ruled that Pope County DHS can be held liable for Eric’s death.

The intent of this column is not to drag social workers and judges through the mud. People tasked with child protection don’t go into that line of work with the intent of failing children. I would wager the vast majority of them, if not all of them, go into it wanting to help kids. I would also wager that many of them, maybe all of them, have helped children and even saved lives. Further, my guess is that those social workers and judges whose recommendations and decisions end in the death of a child suffer mightily for the role they played.

My intent is to decry the secrecy which is intended to protect children and families but in the end

also protects the agencies when things go wrong.

When a child dies after child protective services has been contacted, the records ought to be flung wide open, letting sunlight and air into the room.

No matter how painful that is for county employees, the public needs to know what happened. Were the agencies spread too thin to investigate each case? Did laws prevent them from taking action? Were the case workers burned out? Was the judge irresponsible? Was there a preference to place the child with its mother, even though she was abusive, over a loving father? Tell us your reasoning.

As well known as the names of Eric Dean and Eli Hart have become, they were hardly the only children murdered by their caregivers in our state. According to the Minnesota’s Child Maltreatment Report from 2019 — the most recent report I could find online — maltreatment led to the deaths of 17 Minnesota children and 13 near deaths in 2019.

Eight of those murdered children were known to their county agency, who had investigated reports of child abuse, yet they died anyway. They were almost all babies, age 1 or younger. Many died of neglect, and several died of neglect and abuse.

Why did they remain with their caregivers?

Open those records and let us see.

**“It’s Our Turn” is a weekly column that rotates among members of the Echo Press editorial staff.**

## COMMENTARY

## Minimize exposure to microplastic

**By Jeanne Johnson**  
Alexandria, MN, Citizens for a Sustainable Future

Way back in the 1960s, a popular movie depicted a young college grad played by Dustin Hoffman getting career advice from a portly businessman to “go into plastics — that’s the future.” And, boy, was it good advice! Plastic, a cheap and easily made derivative of petroleum was just what we needed to save the forests. Today we see plastic everywhere — from packaging to home building and as a major component of thousands of industrial products. Many of the new electric cars are a third plastic.

Plastic has made possible the commercialization of thousands of products we might not have had. We have all seen the result — yes, many useful products which make our lives easier or better. We have also seen the tragic effects on our oceans, animal and marine life, our despoiled beaches and rivers, the rotten piles in our landfills. And, plastic production spews pollutants.

There’s another downside to things made out of petroleum. They leak. Recent research has been aimed at finding out just how badly. Studies have found microplastics in everything from human blood to baby poop. Dutch scientist Dick Vethaak said it’s not known where these microplastics end up, whether they are excreted or absorbed in body organs — heart, lungs, kidneys. A more recent study revealed that human cells subjected to microplastic were weakened, thinned or killed.

Global industry is not going to give up plastic any time soon. But we can minimize the damage to human health and wellbeing. Since all living beings are composed of cells without which life is impossible, it is alarming to think how damaging microplastic could prove to be. Until we find proof that it’s safe to eat plastic, we should move swiftly on the personal and political fronts to minimize exposure.

We can’t see microplastic particles, but they are everywhere. In the plastic food jars and containers on our grocery shelves, the cosmetics we wear, plastic water bottles, paint, dinnerware, our toothpaste, grocery bags and all the other single-use plastics that we’ve been taught to use. Look around and you will find them.

This is a problem which ultimately must find a political solution but in a polarized environment, action will be slow. In the meantime, do you want your children drinking microplastic? Get them a metal water bottle and fill it with tap water. Plastic teething ring? Plastic baby bottle? Out! Survey your grocer’s shelves critically and try to find food that’s packaged in glass or metal. Avoid plastic-wrapped vegetables. Make sure your schools and public services are not harboring plastic drink dispensers.

After you’ve taken timely action to reduce the risks to your family be a citizen representative. Google the legislators for your area and drop them a line. You can quote us.

**Citizens for a Sustainable Future is a local organization which believes that working together we can create a more livable future.**

### Submitting letters to the editor

The Echo Press encourages readers to voice their opinions through letters to the editor. Please, however, keep your letters brief and to the point. Letters of more than 300 words or excessively long letters may be edited to a shorter form by the newspaper staff. Personal attacks against private individuals will not be printed. All letters must be signed and include the writer’s address and telephone number. Letters published will include the writer’s name and the city of residence only. Writers are limited to publishing one letter every 30 days.

Submissions can be emailed to [aedenloff@echopress.com](mailto:aedenloff@echopress.com) or submitted to the Echo Press office at 225 7th Ave. E., Alexandria, MN 56308. For information, call (320) 763-3133.