

Steele County Times



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Pure joy and excitement radiate from the faces of members of the Owatonna Huskies boys basketball team after they captured the Section 1AAAA championship trophy Friday night in Rochester. Shown from left: Evan Dushek, Brayden Williams, Ty Creger, Nick Williams and Blake Burmeister with Ayden Walter (with the hoodie to the right of Burmeister) and Collin Vick on the far right. Owatonna defeated the Farmington Tigers 69-61 to qualify for the state tournament. The Huskies opened state action Tuesday afternoon after this edition went to press. For more on the section championship, turn to sports in the B Section.

Panel: Partnerships effective against crime

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

After a rocky start in Southeast Minnesota, the Center of the American Experiment ended on much better footing. The conservative think tank sponsored visits last week to Rochester, with an evening

stop in Owatonna. The plan was to discuss what the group labeled the "Crime Crisis," featuring a panel discussion on current crime trends, an overview of the criminal justice system, the role of key officials in fighting crime and proven strategies to reduce crime.

The panelists included local representatives of law enforcement, the court system and the school district. Instead, the Rochester visit was canceled, "after leftist activists pressured the venue with an online petition signed by 90 people," said Bill Walsh, director

of communications for the group. The CAE immediately filed a breach of contract lawsuit against the Rochester Country Club, and plans to proceed with a claim against the club for damages. No such drama in Owatonna, with the

tone set by Mike Jensen's opening remarks. "What we really hope for today ... is that we have an opportunity to learn from each other, get to know each other, get to know what's happening in the law enforcement community," he said. Jensen is president of

the Owatonna chapter of CAE. Michael Olson, outreach director, said the group is "terribly unique, in that we focus on policy as it relates to the state of Minnesota," concerning education, healthcare, public safety and more. See PANEL on A5 ▶

Chamber's Guthier wins top women's award

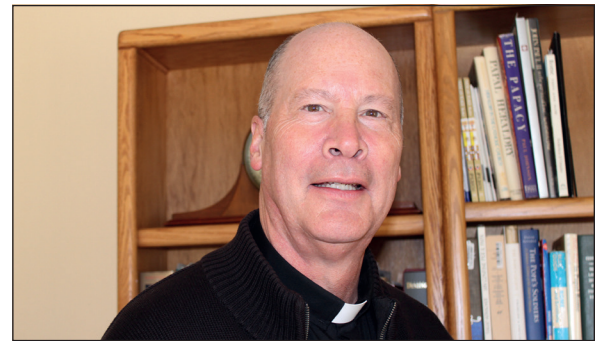
BY JONI HUBRED
STAFF WRITER

Owatonna women took center stage Saturday night during the 50th annual Woman of Achievement awards celebration at the Owatonna Country Club. Owatonna Business Women hosts the event to recognize lifetime achievement, an outstanding young professional, scholarship winners, and above all, to reveal their top award. This year's Woman of Achievement, selected by an independent panel of

judges, is Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Director of Operations Rhonda Guthier. A panel of independent judges evaluated five finalists, including Jennifer Copeland, Tanya Paley, Peng Olson, and Sarah Struss. The award was a surprise to everyone, and no one more than Guthier. "The caliber of women that was in my category, I just can't believe this is happening to me," she said. Panelists said Guthier, a life-long Owatonna

resident, "radiates love of community and its members. Her sense of pride and extensive list of activities and volunteering is impressive and humbling." That includes 50 years with the 4-H program, raising funds with Relay for Life and Walk to End Alzheimer's, volunteering with the Early Edition Rotary Club and Exchange Club, and supporting JA Big Bowl (a Junior Achievement fundraiser), Beds for Kids, and Toys for Tots drives.

In accepting the award, Guthier encouraged everyone to be engaged in the community and "make a difference, small or large, it doesn't matter." "Make sure everything you do is with passion," she said. The event raised more than \$25,000 to support the Owatonna Business Women's scholarship program. Scholarship Committee member Christy Tryhus, who is Dean of Academic Affairs at Riverland College, introduced these 11 women who will each receive \$1,000 to further their education: Continuing education: Beth Christesen, Business Management-Bemidji State University; and Katherine Wurdeman, Family Nurse Practitioner-University of Minnesota. Graduating seniors: Audrey Simon, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Ava Hess, Drake University; Ava Westbrock, University of South Dakota; Haley Meiners, College of St. Benedict; Hillary Haarstad, University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse; Julia Christenson, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities; Jessica Neuharth, South Dakota State University; Madison Moen, University of Wisconsin-Madison; and Melanie Winzenburg, St. Mary's University. Introducing the See CHAMBER on A10 ▶



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Rev. Bill Becker has returned back to his childhood home of Blooming Prairie to take over as priest of four area parishes.

New priest returns home to BP

BY HOWARD LESTRUD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Everything is old and everything is new," says Rev. Bill Becker, reflecting on the return

to his roots as the new priest serving four area parishes. Happy with his new assignment in the Blooming Prairie area, See PRIEST on A12 ▶



STAFF PHOTO BY JONI HUBRED

Woman of Achievement winner Rhonda Guthier is pictured with her grandchildren Lauren and Brady.

Debra J. Flemming 1954-2022

She shared a passion of community journalism

For more than three decades, she shared a passion of community journalism with readers of publications throughout southern Minnesota. There was no hiding the fact that Debra Flemming believed that community newspapers were the heart and soul of any community. Flemming died March 14 at a hospital in Faribault after a very brief bout with lung cancer. She was 67. Her career spanned many years while



Debra J. Flemming working at mostly daily newspapers in her hometown of Waseca, See DEBRA on A3 ▶