

IN SPORTS, A7

100TH WIN FOR MAVS' MCKAY



IN LOCAL & STATE, B1

POND HOCKEY

IN CURRENTS, C1

MANKATO ARTIST DOES GRAPHIC NOVEL

TODAY'S OBITUARIES

- Michael Minich
Pete (Gerald L.) Morrison
William "Bill" Shouts

MORE ONLINE



AP Photos: A village awaits its fate

Just 16 residents, none younger than 59, remain in the Ukrainian village of Zolote, which lies near rebel-held territory in the eastern part of Ukraine. Here Ukrainian troops man trenches in the winter chill as they, and the few remaining residents, wait to see if Russia does indeed invade the former Soviet state as many fear. View the photos at mankatofreepress.com/multimedia.

FIRST & LASTING



Tami Gay was the sole director of Carlson Tillisch Eye Clinic, which has sites in Mankato and New Ulm, until her severe reaction to a coronavirus infection forced her to work fewer hours and even take months off. Now she is a co-director.

County's initial COVID case hopes to build support group for fellow long COVID sufferers

By Jordan Smith jsmith@mankatofreepress.com

Before anyone else in Blue Earth County tested positive for the novel coronavirus, Tami Gay did. And yet 22 months and nearly 14,000 county COVID-19 cases later, Gay has not until recently felt healthy enough to resume a semblance of the life she knew. Most who have COVID-19 recover within two weeks. But Gay developed long COVID, a label that encompasses ongoing or resurgent health problems that occur at least

four weeks after infection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists 18 long-COVID symptoms, including memory and concentration difficulties, mood changes, and conditions that worsen after mental or physical effort. Early victims like Gay had little clarity about the monthslong affliction. She said the virus altered her personality and seriously impaired her cognitive and physical abilities. When Gay considers her nearly full recovery, she emphasizes the role of a Rochester psychiatrist and a local physical therapist. She thinks about how her husband

earns a healthy income at the local Mayo Clinic Health System, a network that also provides access to expert advice. She feels lucky that her own employer backed her the whole way. So the question nags her: What about those who aren't as fortunate? She hopes to address the disparity with a local support group. The mission is to improve mental and physical health by helping people deal with the amorphous symptoms of long COVID by offering Please see COVID, Page A4

Staff, parent concerns aired

District holds first roundtable

By Brian Arola barola@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — From student mental health to teacher burnout to mask policies, residents brought their concerns to Mankato School Board members Saturday at the first of several planned roundtables. Mankato Area Public Schools organized the "coffee and conversations" event at Lincoln Community Center to facilitate discussions between board members, school leaders and residents. It'll be a monthly occurrence through the rest of the school year. Teachers and staff were well represented at the event, with Board member Kristi Schuck saying she was glad they shared what they're going through and hopes they feel heard. "It's going to take a community to meet the needs of our students, staff and families," she said afterward. "I'm glad everybody came to come together and share their frustrations and hope." Teachers spoke about issues ranging from the mental health toll of working through the pandemic to how they need more support in the district. The group who formed around Schuck consisted mainly of teachers Please see SCHOOLS, Page A2

LOTTERY

Saturday's Daily 3 4-6-5

Friday's Gopher 5 7-11-16-19-36

Saturday's Powerball 2-15-38-54-65 and 11

Saturday's Lotto America 5-19-23-30-31 and 3

Saturday's Northstar Cash 2-14-19-20-23

Friday's Mega Millions 3-16-25-44-55 and 13

PAGEFINDER

Table with 2 columns: Category and Page Number. Includes Comics (D1-D4), Corrections (A2), Currents (C1-C6), etc.

WEATHER, PAGE B10

Some sun

High around 20. Low in the low teens.



Copyright 2022, The Free Press



Mankato, Minnesota

Three vie for Nicollet County board seat

Position vacated by incumbent's death

By Jordan Smith jsmith@mankatofreepress.com

NORTH MANKATO — Three candidates are running for the District 3 seat on the Nicollet County Board of Commissioners, the five-member group overseeing county government. Following are profiles and stances of candidates Mark Dehen, Kenneth DeWitte and David Haack. The seat was left vacant after the September death of Denny Kemp. A Feb. 8 primary will determine which two candidates move on to the final election April 12.



Mark Dehen, 60, not only recognizes the parallel between his father's career and his own. He embraces it. A chiropractor who worked with his son for two decades, David Dehen served as North Mankato mayor from 1981 to 1994 and Nicollet County commissioner from 2001 to 2003. In his 12th year as mayor of the county's largest city, Mark Dehen now seeks to broaden his influence and bolster the two

of Lee Boulevard and south of Highway 14.

Mark Dehen, 60, not only recognizes the parallel between his father's career and his own. He embraces it. A chiropractor who worked with his son for two decades, David Dehen served as North Mankato mayor from 1981 to 1994 and Nicollet County commissioner from 2001 to 2003. In his 12th year as mayor of the county's largest city, Mark Dehen now seeks to broaden his influence and bolster the two Please see PRIMARY, Page A3

How to vote

When: Vote in person from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Feb. 8. Where: Precinct 1 votes at St. Paul Lutheran Church, 304 Monroe Ave; Precinct 2 votes at Holy Rosary Catholic School, 546 Grant Ave.; Precinct 3 votes at North Mankato City Council Chambers, 1001 Belgrade Ave. Residents unsure of where their precinct is may visit: www.northmankato.com/elections. Absentee: Absentee ballots and early voting can be completed at the Nicollet County Government Center, 501 S. Minnesota Ave., St. Peter. Or download an application for a mail-in ballot from a link on the city's website at https://www.northmankato.com/citynorthmankato/elections. Once you receive the ballot, complete and mail it to the government center or drop off by 3 p.m. Feb. 8 at the center — not at polling sites. For more information, including how to request a ballot, call 625-4141 or visit: www.co.nicollet.mn.us/161/Election-Voter-Registration.

Advertisement for Rooms and Rest Furniture Mattress. Features a large bed in a bedroom setting. Text includes 'NEW YEAR SALE', 'roomsandrest.com', and 'Mon-Fri: 10am-7pm - Sat: 10am-5pm - Sun: Noon-5pm'.

**“We need that. We need comfort that we’re not crazy. We’re not alone. We know that something’s wrong ... It was like you found your people.”**

TAMI GAY



Pat Christman

Tami Gay, the first person to test positive for COVID-19 in Blue Earth County, has only recently resumed a semblance of the life she knew. She developed long COVID and seeks to start a support group for others who experienced severe symptoms of the illness.

# COVID: Virus seen to have psychiatric effect

Continued from Page A1

professional advice about their ailments. From there, she wants mental health experts to explain coping systems by which people can isolate their worries and outline practical steps to feel better.

“Probably one of the best benefits of all the treatments that I’ve had is having that guidance helping me understand how to keep moving forward, even though it feels like I’m going backwards,” Gay said.

Her goal is to re-create the network of medical professionals without whom she thinks she never would have approached full recovery. She’s seeking the support of local health care providers in an effort based on estimates that 10-30% of people to develop COVID-19 are long haulers.

“There’s a big group of people that weren’t ever hospitalized but their life is changed forever,” Gay said. “Who do they talk to?”

## ‘It’s OK if you don’t come back’

Gay assumed it was exhaustion from travel and perhaps a sinus infection that made her ill in March 2020. She was returning to Mankato from a weeklong trip to Austria and Germany.

When major fatigue made her doubt whether she could stand and walk off the plane once it landed in Minnesota, she suggested to her husband mid-flight that she may actually be sick.

No one at the airport had checked whether Gay or her family members had COVID-19 symptoms, she said.

“If they would have checked our temperatures or anything at the airport, I would have been put in quarantine,” said Gay, who is now age 54 but was 52 at the time of her infection.

The flight back to Minnesota landed March 11 — the same day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Gay tested the next day and got a positive result on March 14. Two days later, Blue Earth County publicly reported its first positive case.

Within days, her husband, her son and her son’s girlfriend also tested positive for the virus. As far as she knows, the quarantine protocol they followed prevented its spread beyond their family unit.

After a week of the initial sickness, she resumed remote work as director of Carlson Tillisch Eye Clinic. She noticed her pace was slow.

When she returned to in-person work April 22, the depth of her mental challenges became

unavoidable.

The same amount of work demanded five times more energy than it previously had, Gay wrote in notes documenting her experience. She forgot how to do payroll, a fairly simple work task she had completed for over a decade. She dropped words while writing and often misspoke.

Unable to state her objectives in a digestible way, she began to write sprawling emails and send them to a coworker, Stacey Breuklander, to summarize concisely.

“When she couldn’t remember something, it would almost come out in anger or frustration just because she couldn’t remember,” Breuklander said of Gay. “She knew that she knew the answer that somebody was asking her (for).”

Gay acknowledged she had an “extremely short fuse” and could quickly become hostile. The memory loss made her fear she was suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s, the disease that killed her maternal grandmother.

After two relapses of severe COVID symptoms, the latter occurring the last week of June, Gay sought medical answers in July. Her concern brought her to a Mayo Clinic doctor in Rochester, who said her neurological symptoms, namely memory loss, were akin to those of a stroke victim.

The doctor told Gay that in order to recover she could work no more than 20 hours a week for half a year. The idea seemed ridiculous and improbable, Gay said.

But by the first week of September, it was clear that working even 20 hours a week was causing her health to decline. She took more than two months off.

As the end of 2020 approached, Gay had lost almost 30 pounds. She said her inability to taste or smell ruined her appetite.

She began to have trouble walking, overcome by feelings of dizziness and confusion. Physicians told her the viral infection had attacked the nerve to her inner ear, disrupting her balance. They recommended physical therapy.

When a colleague visited her at home that fall, the message was stark: “You know, it’s OK if you don’t come back. It’ll be OK.”

“At that time I thought I was never coming back to work. I didn’t think I was gonna even have a very good quality of life, at that point,” Gay said.

Hired in June 2019, Breuklander became the interim director in July 2020 and eventually the director of operations, assuming many of Gay’s responsibilities. Today they are co-directors, with Gay responsible for team, busi-

ness and community relations. She still works reduced hours.

## ‘We’re not crazy’

Starting in June 2020, the Mayo Clinic’s post COVID-19 care center began to treat patients whose symptoms extend beyond three months of an infection.

Going there in July, Gay learned medical terminology to explain the relationship between chronic illness and long COVID, primarily the term central sensitization syndrome — an overheating of the nervous system that enhances sensitivity to pain.

What prompted the idea for a support group, however, were the conversations she had with fellow long haulers during educational video calls.

Many found that their bewilderment about the poorly understood illness was eased by others who could listen and empathize with them.

False opinions about COVID being a hoax or an overblown illness were already rampant, Gay said. A group of people claiming to experience symptoms for months were doubted and scrutinized even more intensely.

“It was so personal. It was like saying, ‘You’re not really sick and it doesn’t matter how you’re feeling,’” Gay said of the misguided beliefs.

She said Mayo nurses had to vie for the attention of groups of long haulers, who often were eager to compare not only physical symptoms but feelings of helplessness or hope. Gay said medical education felt far less important than the human connection occurring.

“We need that. We need comfort that we’re not crazy,” she said. “We’re not alone. We know that something’s wrong ... It was like you found your people.”

A May 2021 study of the first 100 patients to participate in the Mayo Clinic’s COVID-19 Activity Rehabilitation program showed that although symptoms varied widely, destabilizing effects were consistent.

Four of five patients with “post-COVID-19 syndrome” reported unusual fatigue, the most common symptom. Three in five had respiratory complaints and a similar proportion struggled with “brain fog.” Over a third said basic daily activities were difficult, and only one in three people had returned to normal work tasks.

When they did try to resume typical daily functions, negative effects seemed to flare up — what Gay refers to as her “relapses.” The head of the study said many patients needed several months to return to work free of restrictions. Compelled by stress about her

company’s growth and an urge to work as much as possible whenever her brain felt clear, Gay set herself back by doing too much too soon. She said the ingrained American mindset that pushed her to work long hours, despite any ailment, began to crumble.

With long COVID, “the harder you push ... it sets you backwards. You’re not gonna gain any ground by saying, ‘Oh, I can push through it and I’ll be fine,’” she said. “If you push through one day instead of just staying home that day, you’re probably gonna miss three.”

Bryan Smith, a Maryland doctor at the National Institutes of Health focused on infections of the nervous system, said a study he published last January compiled evidence that most people with long COVID suffered issues of the autonomic nervous system. Primary symptoms were lightheadedness, dizziness and gastrointestinal problems.

But characterizing the illness has not revealed why the virus causes it for some and not for others. Even among COVID long haulers, Smith said underlying causes that lead to severe symptoms vary drastically.

“Long COVID is not one disease that fits neatly in a box and can be treated,” he said.

In search of a cause and a way to consistently treat people, Smith’s NIH clinic is conducting an in-depth study of a small number of patients with autonomic issues. But in these earlier stages of science, physicians still lack information to give patients a comprehensive idea of what to expect from post-COVID syndrome.

Many studies indicate vaccination reduces the risk of long COVID among those who develop breakthrough infections. Smith’s clinic has an ongoing study of the matter.

The clearest fact, however, is that vaccines prevent prolonged symptoms in a more obvious way: They’re a bulwark against contracting the virus at all.

“We know that time really helps,” Smith added. “Our study is longitudinal, we do follow up with patients over time. The vast majority of our patients — and for a patient who’s still affected, this sounds difficult to hear — a lot of patients do get better with time alone.”

## ‘I’m not helpless’

Lisa Hardesty, a psychologist at the Mayo Clinic Health System’s Northridge Clinic and a close friend of Gay’s, said she observed concerning changes in her friend. She said Gay would get unreasonably angry at her husband of

three decades because she didn’t feel he understood her experience. She often wanted to be alone rather than talk through issues with him, Gay wrote while documenting her illness.

Her daughter also found her impulsive and difficult to reason with, Gay said. Gay said she felt 19 again: “I was very impulsive and I had no sense of consequence, whether it was actions or words.”

Noticing “perseveration” — incessantly repeating one’s account of the same issues — Hardesty said she got her friend a referral for treatment. The novel occurrence mirrored a trend in her professional life, where one of her specialty areas is mental health care for those with chronic pain.

“That has been something new: Actually seeing people developing psychiatric symptoms, coming to see a psychologist for the first time ever in their lives, and COVID is the reason,” said Hardesty, who has worked in primary care for 23 years.

The uptick in patients has been defined by multiple trends. Young people, those in college or in their 20s, may have had underlying conditions like ADHD or anxiety but were puzzled by their sudden inability to focus. A shocking link in many of their patient histories was a COVID-19 infection months prior.

“I had two college kids who were going to fail out until we helped get them back on track,” Hardesty said. “And COVID was the only thing we could put our finger on that made a difference.”

Other patients have felt their anxiety to be exacerbated by isolating, quarantining and warnings to avoid social gatherings. Hardesty came to call this a struggle to get out of one’s “COVID cave.”

The shift in Hardesty’s professional life has led her to advocate for a local support group alongside Gay.

A person’s mental health benefits from having a name for ambiguous ailments that feel beyond their control, she said. Scientific and emotional validation can remove shame about negative lifestyle habits resulting from an illness.

“Without knowing what you’re experiencing, you tend to choose the wrong options,” she said. “Under stress — which is I think the way to understand this: this is your body under stress — under stress we make worse decisions. We’ve known that.”

Understanding one’s condition “helps people say, ‘OK, now I have a plan of action,’” she added. “Now I can do something. I’m not helpless to this condition.”