

# COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS



## Little cars, big smiles

**Smile makers build  
Toys for God's Kids**  
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**Treatment center  
changes young lives**  
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Asher Smith plays with a few  
of the thousands of small  
wooden cars built each year  
by Toys for God's Kids

# Counting Every Blessing



**Walker Witt - CEO**  
wwitt@bhec.coop

Many of you have probably noticed an improvement in the style and content of this column over the past five months. I am fortunate to work with a great team, and I want to thank our Information Technology Specialist, Jeff Barnes, Manager of Operations, Bill Brisk, and Director of Communications and Member Services, Michelle Fischer, for their dedication and willingness to take on the task of writing the monthly column since June.

In May, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had a 14-hour surgery at the Mayo Clinic in June. The surgery was successful, and I was able to return to work part-time within a few weeks. Since August, my work schedule has been pretty much back to normal, but the one duty that I struggled with was communication with all of you. I believe the reason for that is that my priority is the cooperative. I always want the focus to be on the co-op, and not on me. I was diagnosed with the tumor a few weeks before our Annual Meeting. I decided at that time that I would videotape my presentation and not attend the meeting. I wanted that meeting to focus on our co-op, and I felt I would be a distraction from that.

I have been avoiding this column because I knew that, at least for this one month, I would have to write about myself. The timing for this column is good. This is the time of the year when many of us consciously reflect on the many blessings we have. I am very grateful for my family and friends and for the opportunity to serve the members of Black Hills Electric Cooperative. I am so thankful for my doctors in Rapid City, my surgeon and his team in Rochester, and the greatest nurse in the world, my wife Jean.

I am thankful for our Board of Directors, their leadership for our cooperative, and their willingness to volunteer and serve. Being a board member of an electric cooperative during this dynamic time in the electric

industry is not easy. Our directors put in hundreds of hours each year educating themselves, preparing for and attending meetings, and strategically planning to ensure that the mission of the cooperative is met. All of our employees and directors strive every day to meet the co-op's mission: "To provide great service at the lowest cost consistent with sound business practices."

I am thankful to be part of the co-op family. Our employees are the most dedicated workers that I know. Our linemen consistently go above and beyond restoring power during the most challenging times. Our office personnel works tirelessly with our members every day. They help members understand their bills, work on payment arrangements, and listen to concerns about how electric rates impact their lives.

I am thankful for our Chief Financial Officer, Sammi Langendorf, and Manager of Operations, Bill Brisk, for taking on my responsibilities when I was recovering. The co-op didn't miss a beat.

The thing that I am most thankful for at our co-op, is our members. Black Hills Electric Cooperative exists only because of YOU, the member. Thank you for voicing your thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Keep e-mailing, writing letters, and calling. This is your co-op, and your thoughts and opinions are appreciated and do make a difference.

I hope this is the last column that is written by me, about me. My tumor was benign; however, due to its size and location, I have to do five to six weeks of radiation during the first part of this upcoming year. I will be spending part of January and February in balmy Rochester, Minnesota.

I wish all of you a very Happy Thanksgiving!



**COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS**

**BLACK HILLS ELECTRIC**

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# Pringle Area Meeting

Black Hills Electric Cooperative held the Pringle Area Meeting on September 15th at the Pringle VFD. The Argyle and Pringle fire departments put together a great spread of hamburgers & hot dogs, homemade salads, desserts, and more!



The departments split \$580 that was donated during the meeting. Your cooperative also gave each department a monetary donation for their efforts. If you missed this area meeting, the co-op's annual soup suppers will be in February across our service territory. Watch the January and February newsletters for times and locations!



## Murphy



# Deck your halls with home safety in mind

It's time to deck those halls - safely. More than 800 home fires are caused by holiday decorations each year, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

An additional 170 home fires are caused by Christmas trees each year. Keep these tips in mind for a safe holiday season:

- Carefully inspect all electrical decorations before you use them. Cracked or damaged sockets and loose or exposed wires can cause serious shock or start a fire.
- Make sure all extension cords and electrical decorations are being used properly - indoor-rated cords indoors, outdoor-rated cords for outside decorations.
- Inspect extension cords for damage and discard (not repair) any that are not completely intact.
- Never mount or support light strings in a way that might damage the cord's insulation.
- Outdoor electrical lights and decorations should be plugged into circuits protected by ground-fault circuit interrupters.
- Exercise caution when decorating near power lines. Keep yourself and your ladder at least 10 feet from power lines.
- Turn off all indoor and outdoor electrical decorations before leaving home or going to sleep.
- Avoid overloading electrical outlets with too many decorations or electrical devices. They can overheat and cause a fire.
- Never connect more than three strings of incandescent lights together.
- Water your Christmas tree daily.
- Keep all decorations at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
- Avoid using candles. The flames are just too dangerous with all the flammable decorations around.
- Purchase electrical decorations from reputable retailers and that are approved by a nationally recognized testing lab such as UL, Intertek or CSA.

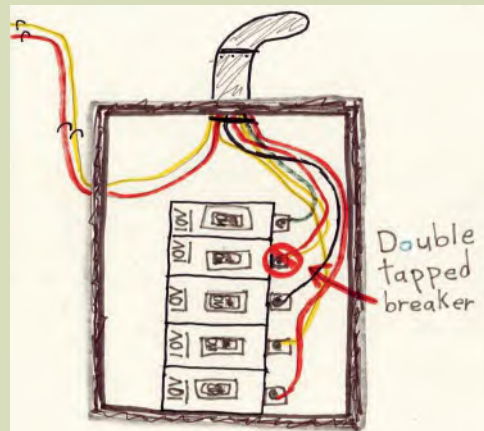


## A NEW TEACHING TOOL FOR SOLAR POWER EDUCATION



Rushmore Electric and Touchstone Energy have joined together to construct a demo trailer designed to teach co-op members across the state more about how solar power functions. The trailer is equipped with fold-out collection panels and also battery storage capability. Co-op energy experts use the trailer to frame discussions about net metering, interconnection agreements and more.

To see a video of the trailer and learn more about how electric cooperatives serve our members, visit Cooperative Connections Plus by scanning the QR code at right.



## Don't play on transformer boxes

### Olaf Sahlstrom

Olaf Sahlstrom, 9, shares a tip he learned from his parents, Ben and Naomi Sahlstrom: Double-tapped breakers are unsafe and can lead to overheating, arcing, and electrical fires. The Sahlstroms reside in Tracy, MN and are members of Lyon-Lincoln Electric Cooperative.

Kids, send your drawing with an electrical safety tip to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). If your poster is published, you'll receive a prize. All entries must include your name, age, mailing address and the names of your parents. Colored drawings are encouraged.

# CHRISTMAS DESSERTS

## PEANUT BUTTER PIE

**Ingredients:**

1 heaping c. peanut butter  
 1 8 oz. pkg. cream cheese  
 (softened)  
 1 8 oz. tub cool whip (thawed)  
 1/2 c. milk  
 2 c. powdered sugar graham  
 cracker pie crust (prepared)  
 Crushed Butterfingers or Reeses  
 for garnish

**METHOD**

Thoroughly mix peanut butter and cream cheese. Add 1/2 cup milk and slowly add 2 cups powdered sugar. Mix well. Fold in cool whip. Put in a prepared graham cracker crust. Makes two 9" pies or one 10" pie with a little extra. Top with crushed candy. Place in freezer until frozen. Remove from freezer 10 minutes before serving.

**Elaine Rieck, Harrisburg**

## HOLIDAY HOT CHOCOLATE

**Ingredients:**

8 qt. box powdered milk  
 1 lb. can Nestles Cocoa Mix  
 7-8 oz. jar powdered creamer  
 3 c. powdered sugar  
 1/3 c. cocoa

**METHOD**

Mix in order given in large bowl. Put in air tight container. Use 1/4 cup mix per cup of hot water. Makes about 16-cup mix.

**Phyllis Niemann, Clear Lake**

## MOM'S CHRISTMAS DESSERT

**Ingredients:**

2-1/2 c. Rice Krispies  
 1/2 c. light brown sugar  
 1 c. slivered almonds or toasted  
 nut meats  
 1/2 c. butter, melted  
 1/2 gal. vanilla ice cream  
 1 can pie cherries  
 1/2 tsp. almond flavoring

**METHOD**

Mix first four ingredients together. Spread half mixture in a 9x13 pan evenly. Cut and press vanilla ice cream on top and spread remaining mixture on top. Freeze. When ready to serve, stir pie filling and almond flavoring together and heat on stove top or microwave and use for topping individual pieces.

**Patty Sinning, Lennox**

## GINGERBREAD KISSED THUMBPRINT COOKIES

**Ingredients:**

3 c. flour  
 2 tsps. ground ginger  
 1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
 1 tsp. baking soda  
 1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg  
 1/4 tsp. salt  
 3/4 c. (1-1/2 sticks) butter,  
 softened  
 3/4 c. firmly packed brown sugar  
 1/2 c. molasses  
 1 egg  
 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract  
 1/4 c. granulated sugar  
 60 milk chocolate kisses

**METHOD**

Mix flour, ginger, cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg and salt in large bowl. Set aside. Beat butter and brown sugar in large bowl with electric mixer on medium until light and fluffy. Add molasses, egg and vanilla; mix well. Gradually beat in flour mixture on low speed until well mixed. Press dough into a thick flat disk. Wrap in plastic wrap. Refrigerate 4 hours or overnight. Preheat oven to 350°F. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll in granulated sugar to coat. Place 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake 8-10 minutes or until edges of cookies begin to brown. Immediately press a chocolate candy into center of each cookie. Remove to wire racks; cool completely. Store cookies in airtight container up to 5 days.

**mccormick.com**

**Please send your favorite recipes to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). Each recipe printed will be entered into a drawing for a prize in December 2022. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.**



# DRY FORK STATION

**Michelle Fischer**  
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We were thrilled to hear that Basin lifted its COVID restrictions and began allowing tours again in its facilities. On September 22nd, close to 30 BHEC members and employees toured the Dry Fork Station, seven miles north of Gillette, WY.

The Dry Fork Station is a coal-based electric generation power plant owned by Basin Electric Power Cooperative. Basin Electric is a consumer-owned, regional cooperative headquartered in

Bismarck. It generates and transmits electricity to 131 rural member electric systems in nine states: Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. These member systems distribute electricity to about three million member-owners. The rated capacity of the Dry Fork Station is 422 megawatts (MW); however, the net generation is about 385 MW. One megawatt of capacity is generally considered to be sufficient for 800 homes, so the Dry Fork Station's output can provide enough electricity for about 308,000 homes.

Production of electricity at a coal-based power plant involves heating water to make steam. The steam spins a turbine connected to a generator, which produces electricity. This cycle is basically the same whether a plant gets heat from burning coal, oil or natural gas, or from nuclear fission. Beyond the similarity in this cycle, power plants are quite different from each other.

The steam is used to drive a multi-stage turbine connected to a generator. The turbine develops about 563,220 horsepower to spin the generator at exactly 3,600 revolutions per minute to produce electricity. The speed of the turbine generator is constant, regardless of generator output. Once the steam exits the turbine, it is directed to the air-cooled condenser. The condenser acts like a giant radiator, where the steam is cooled back to water. The cooled water is then returned to the boiler for reheating so it can be used again.



**BASIN'S ENERGY PORTFOLIO**



The water-to-steam-to-water cycle is a closed-loop process. Make-up water is added as needed to maintain water quality and quantity. The Dry Fork Station is a zero-discharge facility, and its dry cooling technology is designed to conserve water resources. The majority of electricity produced at the Dry Fork Station is sent via 125 miles of a 230,000-volt transmission line to substations in northeast Wyoming, where it connects to the transmission grid.



The members and employees were able to take a tour of the coal mine and the power station. We were also able to view a real-time blast! After reviewing the surveys, it appears that everyone had a wonderful time and were able to learn more about where their energy comes from.

We will be offering this tour again in 2023. If you want to get put on the attendee list, please let me know!



Smiling faces all around. Especially from Bill Kassube (front right). He was the trivia winner and received a \$50 bill credit!



Photos of the 2022 Dry Fork Bus Tour attendees. Please contact the office if you're interested in going on the 2023 Bus Tour.



LeRoy Iedema, Richard Ringling and Duane Strand crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year from their 12x10-foot workshop in Platte. Photo by Billy Gibson

## Duane Strand gets lots of 'smileage' out of making toy cars for children

**Billy Gibson**

editor@sdrea.coop

Frustrated moms across the ages have been searching for a surefire method for getting an unruly child to simmer down.

Duane Strand is pretty sure he's found a failsafe solution: toy cars.

Several years ago, Strand began building tiny wooden cars in his nondescript backyard shed in Platte. He recalls visiting Pierre one evening and having dinner at a local restaurant when a young boy suddenly started pitching a fit and hollering at the top of his lungs.

Strand just happened to have one of the cars in his pocket. He reached out and handed it to the child and was rather amazed at the result. Not only did the whining stop forthwith, but that boy's frown turned upside down as the

kid started beaming from ear to ear.

"He quit yelling right then and there. His whole attitude changed," Strand recalls. "These cars really have a soothing effect on the kids."

That's the impact Strand is shooting for as he and his three-man team of retirees crank out nearly 60,000 toy cars each year. They're looking to squeeze all the "smileage" they can get out of the toy cars they build.

The main construction crew includes retired farmer Richard Ringling and retired mechanic LeRoy Iedema. Ringling usually works the drill press to create holes in the wood where the axles will go. Then Iedema follows up by pressing the wheels onto the axles. He came up with a way to make sure the wheels roll straight and stay in place and dares anyone to try and pull off a wheel.

There are others who join in the

process: Justin Kok cuts the wood into manageable blocks; Brett Wynia performs repairs on the drill presses, band saws, sanders, routers and other pieces of equipment when they break down; and Curtis Versteeg helps to sand down the rough surfaces on the cars.



Toy cars are distributed by military personnel serving overseas.

And just down the road from the shop is the Platte Lumber Yard, where many of the material supplies are stored until needed for production. Strand said it was the folks down at the lumber yard who initiated the vital connection with





Dustin Knutson of Boyds Hardwood Gunstock supplies the toy makers with the laminated wood used to create the tiny cars (inset) for worldwide distribution. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

Boys Hardwood Gunstock that keeps the operation humming along.

“Without Boyds we wouldn’t be able to do any of this,” Strand said.

Dustin Knutson, a member of Central Electric Cooperative and part owner of the company that bills itself as the largest after-market gun stock maker in the world, is a Shriner with a heart for community service and said he was all-in when Strand approached him about supporting the program by supplying excess wood.

“They’re really easy to work with,” he said, noting that he keeps one of the cars on his desk. “They take whatever they can get and they show up consistently. We started saving off-cut blocks of wood specifically for the cars. The laminated wood works well because it’s colorful and looks good and the kids can pick out their favorite one.”

Strand’s distribution system is a bit scatter shot but he still manages to send them all over the globe. Anyone he knows who is planning a trip gets a supply of cars. Knutson, for instance, takes them with him when he travels for business or pleasure, whether vacationing in Mexico or hunting in Africa.

“People in America may think these are just simple toys, but I’ve been in parts of the world where a toy for a kid is a stick and a rock,” Knutson said. “But these little cars give kids something to smile about. Duane and his guys are just beautiful people doing good things for the good of humanity and we’re happy to help them any way we can.”

The toys also ride along in ambulances, military satchels and police vehicles in the event a child needs to be calmed. They show up in doctor’s offices, churches and other venues.

The operation is affiliated with a group called Toys for God’s Kids, a non-denominational organization based in Denver. Strand is the only affiliated “smile maker” in South Dakota.

While the three-man crew claims they’re working harder than they used to before retiring, Iedema assigns a greater value to his toil beyond the opportunity to put a smile on a kid’s face. He said his heart doctor has informed him that he’s in better shape than before he started woodworking three years ago. He’s slimmer, more active and feels a lot better.

Strand chips in, “...yeah, and he’s



more ornery than ever, too!”

Collectively, the guys crank out about 250 cars a day scrunched inside the 12 x 10-foot shed. Each unit has to be dipped in linseed oil to protect children from any potential toxicity. The toys are boxed and shipped to their destination at the recipient’s expense.

Strand doesn’t know how much longer he’s going to be able to keep cranking out cars. He’ll reach the age of 90 in a few months and his friend Ringling has a plan: “I told him when he turns 90 we’re going to take him up by the interstate and take a picture underneath the sign that says I-90. Get it?”



# SHORT-GO WINNERS

Five dependents of Black Hills Electric Cooperative members won short-go shirts sponsored by Touchstone Energy® Cooperative. This is the 15th year electric cooperatives across South Dakota have supported the SDHSRA (South Dakota High School Rodeo Association). Congratulations to all the short-go winners!

**SDHSRA**  
South Dakota High School Rodeo Association



**Cody Dirkes**  
Team Roping - Custer High School



**Tegan Fite**  
Team Roping - Custer High School



**Kylene Baker**  
Breakaway - Hot Springs High School



**Trevor Hartshorn**  
Calf Roping - Custer High School



**Isaac Kremer**  
Bareback - Custer High School

# Accepting Scholarship Applications

Black Hills Electric Cooperative is offering college scholarships to graduating high school seniors. Basin Electric Power Cooperative provides a \$1,000 scholarship, and Rushmore Electric accepts runner-up applications for \$500. We will also be drawing for scholarships at our Annual Meeting on June 1, 2023, in Rapid City.

You can find the application online at [www.bhec.coop](http://www.bhec.coop), or request an application to be mailed or e-mailed to you. Completed applications and supporting documents must be returned to BHEC before Friday, February 3, 2023. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Michelle Fischer at 800-742-0085 or 605-673-4461.

## AVAILABLE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR DEPENDENTS OF BHEC MEMBERS:

- \$1,000 Basin Electric
- \$500 Rushmore Electric

## REQUIREMENTS:

- Must be a U.S. citizen
- Has to be a dependent of a BHEC member
- The graduating senior must be planning to enroll at an accredited college, university, or technical school.

## THE RECIPIENTS WILL BE CHOSEN BASED ON:

- A combination of SAT or ACT scores
- Overall grade-point average
- Personal statement of career goals
- One-page essay
- An adult appraisal

**DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 3, 2023**  
**WINNER WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN APRIL**



# Washington Youth Tour is back!

Black Hills Electric Cooperative will sponsor a junior or senior high school student who is a dependent of a BHEC member on an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. Each June, over 1,800 high school juniors and seniors travel to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Rural Electric Youth Tour. During the week, they learn about Washington, D.C., government, cooperative philosophy, and rural electrification. The students are selected and sponsored by their local rural electric cooperatives. The South Dakota Rural Electric Association (SDREA) coordinates arrangements for the South Dakota students.

The weeklong trip will be held on June 17-23, 2023. Participants will meet for an orientation meeting on Saturday, June 17 in Sioux Falls. Then, the group will fly to D.C. on Sunday, June 18, and return to South Dakota on Friday, June 23. A commercial bus will be used for transportation while in D.C.

Each applicant must submit an essay, not to exceed 500 words, on the following topic:

**"If chosen as a youth tour delegate, you will be traveling to Washington, D.C. to experience and learn about America's rich history. What moment in American history do you wish you had been a part of, and what would you have contributed?"**

All essays must be typed and include a cover sheet that states the title of the essay, the applicant's name and address, name of parent or guardian, and the name of your school. Applications can be found online at [www.bhec.coop](http://www.bhec.coop). All submissions must be received by:

**Friday, March 3, 2023**



# CHANGING YOUNG LIVES

The Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

## Treatment center helps young people get back on the right path

**Billy Gibson**

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

It was a small compliment, but it meant everything to the young lady who wasn't quite accustomed to receiving positive reinforcement. A simple affirmation spoken softly and sincerely into her ear: "You're gorgeous, and you're worthy." And the tears began to flow.

The Indian Health Service Great Plains Youth Regional Treatment Center near Mobridge is a place where at-risk youth can go to address their challenges with drug and alcohol abuse and find the support they need to deal with difficult situations.

Acting Clinical Director Charita Dowdell remembers that encounter with the young woman.

"I tell all of our residents how gorgeous they are and that I see the beauty in them and who they are deep down inside," Dowdell said. "I told her she was worthy and that she had value,

and she just broke down. She told me that nobody had ever said that to her."

That's just one of the stories about how the treatment center's staff strive to change the lives of teens who enter the program. There are many others.

Program Director Lavon Booth has been involved with the residential program for 20 years, initially as an administrative officer when she started in 2002. She previously served at the Cheyenne River Service Unit in her hometown of Eagle Butte before starting at the YRTC.

She sees the transformation of residents captured in plain view during graduation ceremonies that take place when the 12-week session concludes.

"We're very fortunate to see the change that happens in our residents from the time they arrive until the time they graduate," she said. "We see them moving in a positive direction and at graduation we get to hear them speak intimately about what they've learned and you see how it all comes together.

They come in very shy and reserved, and they leave here carrying a more positive spirit and more confidence. It's really touching for us and very rewarding."

The treatment center is housed in the old Chief Gall Inn hotel on land leased from the Standing Rock tribe. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 are referred through tribal alcohol programs, local schools, community service organizations and other agencies.

According to the center's mission statement, the program "is dedicated to promoting a healthy lifestyle restoring balance and harmony in mind, body and spirit to our American Indian youth and their families."

Dowdell said playing a role in watching that mission statement come true to life in the form of changed behaviors and more positive attitudes makes her know she's definitely making a profound difference.

One effective modality is a mentoring program where residents taking part in the rehabilitation process shepherd those who are just entering the facility. Not only do the incumbent residents show the newbies around the physical



The youth treatment center is located in the former Chief Gall Inn hotel near Mobridge. *Photo by Roger Lawien*

space, but they also listen to their concerns, answer questions and try to allay their fears that stem from living in a new environment with certain rules, guidelines and expectations.

“When they start feeling homesick or afraid or stressed and they just need someone near their age to talk to, it helps them make the adjustment so they can settle down and focus on what they need to do to make changes. That bond is something that actually helps both of them get through and graduate successfully,” she said.

Dowdell noted there is a concern among staff about residents returning to a challenging environment. So, upon graduation, the youth receive support through a tracking system where staffers make regular check-in calls after three days, three months, six months and a year. A tele-health network is also

available to the graduates.

Role-playing also helps re-integration, Dowdell said. She added that the residents are taught to anticipate the same kind of challenges they faced before and how to handle them with a different approach.

“They return as a changed person, but everybody else around them will be doing the same things,” she said. “We tell them to stay connected to their support system and manage their emotions; how to be true to yourself while being respectful to others. We prepare them for what life is going to look like when they leave.”

She mentioned one particular youngster who entered the program with a defiant attitude and dealing with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. She knuckled down academically and caught up to her class grade. After

graduation, she returned to juvenile detention for seven months. But in the end, she straightened out her life by applying the things she learned at the center.

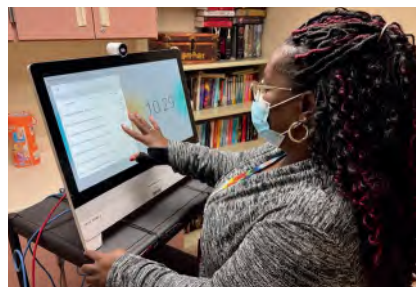
“She struggled with treatment, but she sent us a letter thanking us for what the program did for her,” Dowdell said. “She said she was grateful for giving her the skills to manage the difficult predicament she was going through. She changed her mentality and grew and matured and became a new person.”

Dowdell stressed that parents can play a key role in helping their children navigate through rehabilitation or prevent them from becoming a candidate in the first place.

“Listen to your children,” she emphasized. “They are saying something to you, but often they don’t feel like they’re being heard. Before you shut that door, listen to what they’re saying. You may have to shut the door anyway, but at least take the time to listen to what they have to say.”

Visit [www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrct/](http://www.ihs.gov/greatplains/healthcarefacilities/greatplainsyrct/).

Lavon Booth, left, and Charita Dowdell, work to provide students the skills they need to change the direction of their lives.



# SANTA SACS FOR KIDS

The Botkins - Amanda, Dean, Elizabeth, Anna and Eric - work as a team to provide gift bags for students. Photo by Billy Gibson

## Botkin family creates Santa Sacs program to spread holiday cheer

**Billy Gibson**

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Each Christmas season, the Botkin family home nestled in the foothills just outside of Spearfish is transformed from a cozy chalet-style space into a tightly managed, finely tuned assembly center.

The goal is to produce dozens of cinch sacks full of Christmas gifts for school-age children. There's even a name for the operation: Santa Sacs for Kids.

Amanda Botkin and her husband, Eric, have spent the past 10 yuletide seasons organizing the program and working in conjunction with local school counselors to connect with students and distribute the gift bags. When the calendar page flips to December, the Botkins and their three children ages 8 through 14 kick into high gear and the home starts buzzing with activity.

To achieve maximum efficiency – or possibly to prevent the family pets from completely freaking out - the process is

departmentalized. In the kitchen area, bags are filled with coloring books and stickers and small toys for kindergarten and elementary school children. In the living room, items specifically for older female students are gathered up and placed in pink plastic sacks. Down the hallway, fast-food gift cards, winter hats and personal hygiene products like body wash and shampoo for high schoolers are collected and deposited in the totes.

Closer to Christmas and before school lets out for the break, the bags are loaded up in the family Sequoia and transported to counselors at different schools in the area.

The entire program was Amanda's brainchild, which stemmed from her quest for a way to spark a spirit of giving and community service within her own children – and most of all, a sense of gratitude for blessings received.

"My oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was in kindergarten and I just felt that it was very important for my kids to understand how fortunate we are as a



Eric's sister, Amy Irion, also enjoyed participating in the annual project.

family. They need to know what it's like to do things for others," she said. "Not everybody has a Christmas that looks like ours does."

Amanda, who works as a nurse in Spearfish, contacted local school counselor and personal friend Mandi Scott and shared the details of her plan. Scott climbed aboard without hesitation. Then Amanda hopped on social media to seek support from other friends, relatives and anyone else interested in contributing to the project. The response was overwhelming.

"We've received so much help from so many people who were willing to donate items or funds to buy gifts," she said. "But we wouldn't be able to do



Anna Botkin, a student at Spearfish Middle School, has learned that it's more important to give than to receive. *Photo by Billy Gibson*

anything without participation from our counselors. We do everything through them and everything is anonymous with the kids. They give us the ages and genders and we put together the Santa Sacs for them based on the information we get. School counselors have a really hard job and don't always get the recognition they deserve, so we want them to know how much we appreciate what they do and the critical services they provide. They're amazing!"

While Amanda says that pursuing the project is its own reward, occasionally the counselors will forward messages of thanks they've received from students.

"It's nice to get notes when the kids send them," Amanda said. "But it's mostly about trying to give them the kinds of gifts that they'll like or use or have fun with."

Eric Botkin said he was gung-ho from the beginning when his wife approached him with her plans. He describes the influence his single mother had on developing his understanding of charity. When he was younger, his mom worked

Elizabeth was a youngster when her mother started Santa Sacs for Kids and helps each year to stuff and distribute gift bags.

at a nursing home in Douglas, WY, and he and his siblings would spend Christmas visiting with residents and giving them presents. When Eric was in high school, his mother was a patrolling police officer and used her position to serve others and help solve problems.

During the first year of Santa Sacs for Kids, Eric's role was to take care of the younger kids, Anna and Dean, while kindergartner Elizabeth played the role of Amanda's elf.

"I kept an eye on the kids while Elizabeth and Amanda went out and shopped," Eric said. "But then as the years went along, the number of bags and gifts kept growing. We needed



every hand in the house and whatever volunteers we could get. Amanda has a huge heart and is a great person and always tries to make sure there are nice things in the bags. She wants the kids to all love what they get."

Amanda, not exactly a loafer, has bigger dreams for the program she created: "I'd really like to get more of the surrounding communities involved and put more bags out there. There's so much need."

She would also like to see more older kids get involved in Christmas giving projects so that they can learn the lessons that Elizabeth has learned.

Elizabeth, a 14-year-old freshman at Spearfish High School, is a track and wrestling athlete and also participates in Spartans for Spartans, a group that helps elementary students make a smoother transition to middle school.

"I like getting Christmas presents, but it's more important to give to others," she said. "I like doing something positive with my family and it's great knowing I'm helping other kids make their lives better."

For those who wish to donate, visit <https://gofund.me/2f62016a>.

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**December 15-18, 2022**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

To have your event listed on this page, send complete information, including date, event, place and contact to your local electric cooperative. Include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Information must be submitted at least eight weeks prior to your event. Please call ahead to confirm date, time and location of event.

**NOV. 25**  
**Olde Tyme Christmas Kick-off and Parade**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 25**  
**"Light up the Night" Parade and Fireworks**  
Belle Fourche, SD

**NOV. 25-26**  
**Kris Kringle Kraft Fair**  
Hill City, SD

**NOV. 26**  
**Gregory Mid-Winter Fair**  
Gregory Auditorium  
Gregory, SD  
605-830-9778

**DEC. 2-3**  
**Christmas in the Hills**  
Mueller Center  
Hot Springs, SD  
605-745-4140

**DEC. 3**  
**Santa's Thrift Village**  
Minneluzahan Senior Center  
Rapid City, SD  
605-394-1887

**DEC. 3**  
**Tabor's Holiday Light Parade**  
Tabor, SD  
605-660-0274

**DEC. 3**  
**60th Annual Wreath and Centerpiece Sale**  
Central States Fair Grounds,  
Rapid City, SD  
605-343-0710

**DEC. 3**  
**Julefest 2022: Scandinavian Christmas Festival & Bazaar**  
8 a.m.-2p.m.  
Our Savior's Lutheran Church  
Spearfish, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Sioux Falls Legion Post 15 Pancake Breakfast**  
8:30 a.m.-noon  
1600 W Russell St.  
Sioux Falls, SD

**DEC. 4**  
**Hartford Hometown Christmas**  
Hartford, SD  
www.hartfordhtc.com

**DEC. 4**  
**Walk Through Bethlehem**  
United Methodist Church  
Webster, SD  
605-345-3747

**DEC. 10**  
**Frontier Christmas**  
Fort Sisseton Historic State Park  
Lake City, SD  
605-448-5474

**DEC. 15-18**  
**Christmas at the Cathedral**  
521 N Duluth Ave.  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-988-3765

**DEC. 17**  
**Custer Christmas for Kids**  
Custer High School  
Custer, SD  
custerchristmas4kids@gmail.com

**JAN. 14**  
**Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament**  
Registration Starts at 1 p.m.  
\$80 for a four-person team  
Meadowood Lanes  
Rapid City, SD  
605-393-2081

**Note: Please make sure to call ahead to verify the event is still being held.**